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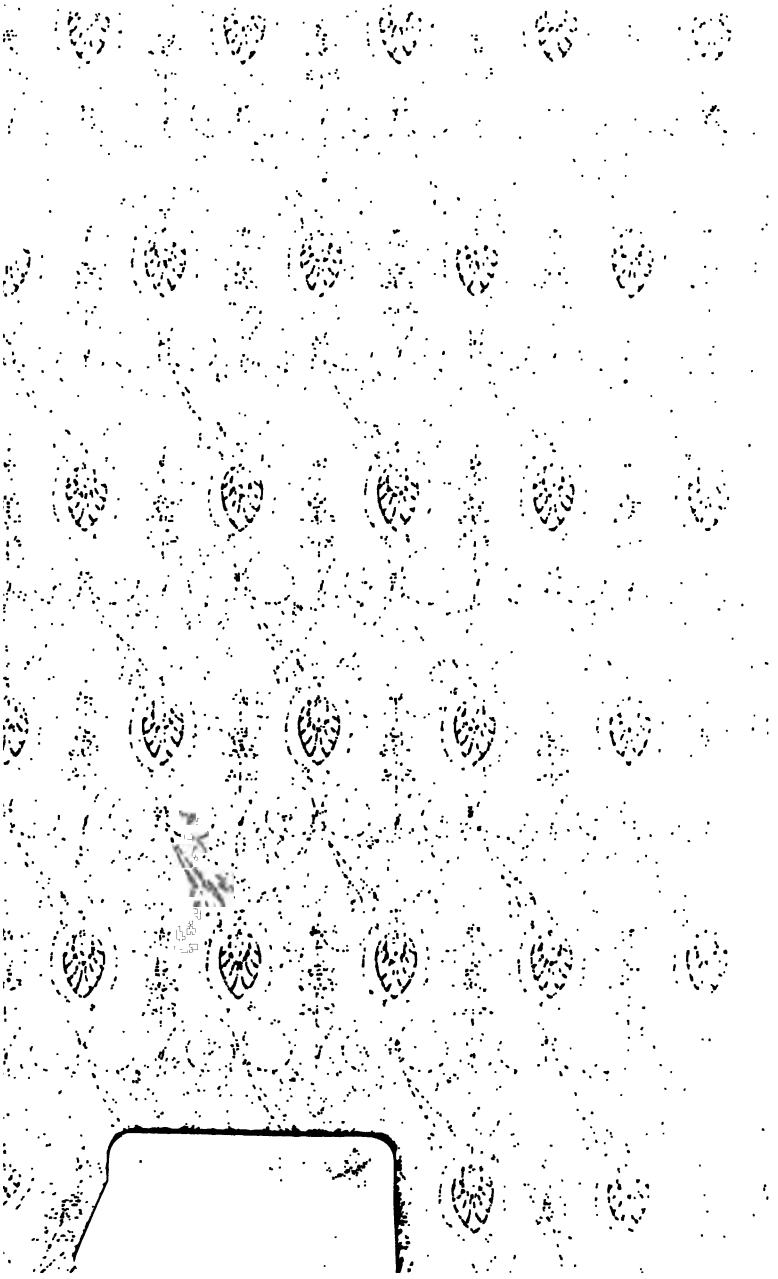
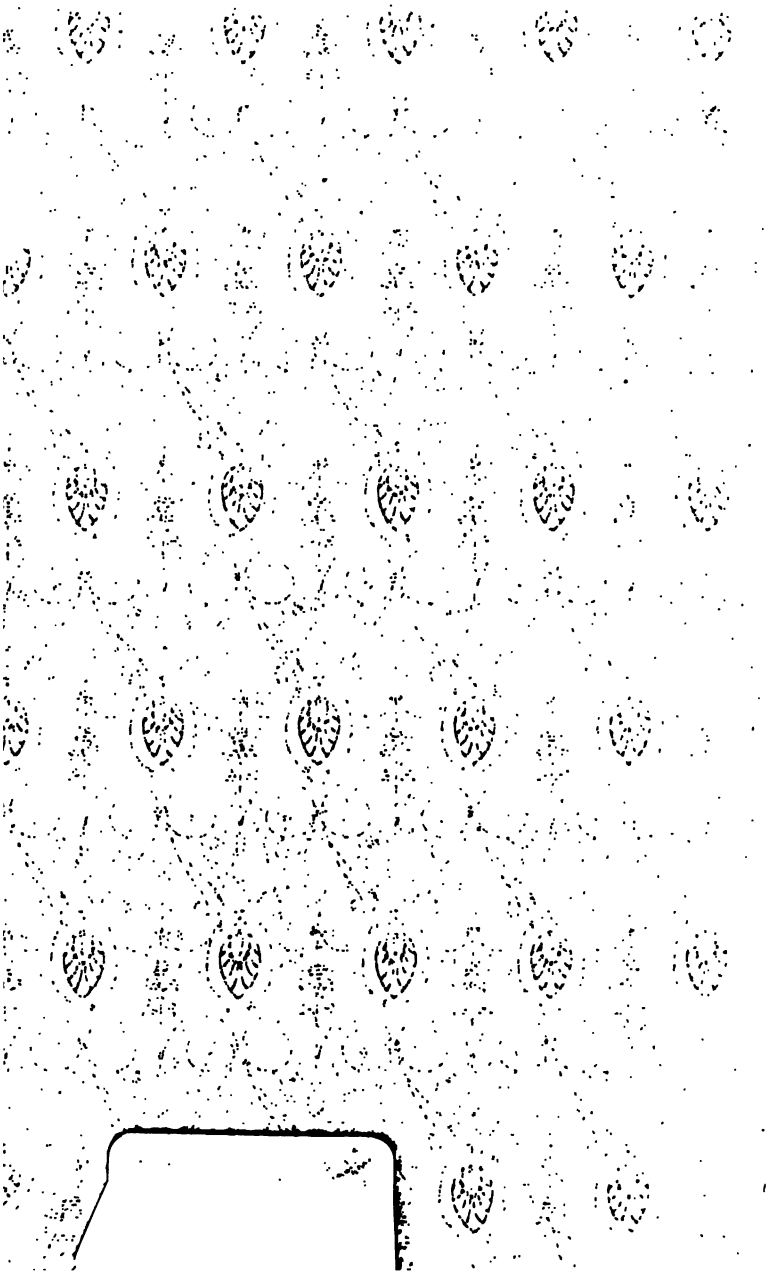
Mrs. Raven's Temptation





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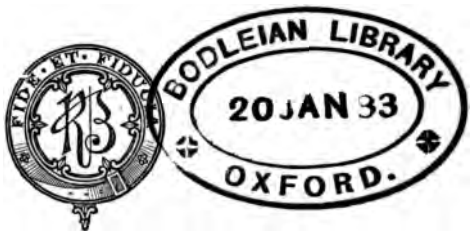
MRS. RAVEN'S TEMPTATION.

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"DR. HARDY'S MARRIAGE."

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. III.



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MRS. RAVEN'S TEMPTATION.

CHAPTER I.

VOICES.

MRS. RAVEN felt rather surprised to see how glad Evelyn Agate appeared to be on returning to Ravenscourt. She had expected a little youthful disinclination to exchange a circle of bright young faces, and all the full and happy life of the minister's house, for the monotonous solitude of the Court.

Yet, truly, how beautiful it was! Mrs. Raven could not help saying so aloud, as the carriage drove slowly up the avenue.

The solemnity of late autumn slept upon the scene. The beauty might be that of decay, but it was rich and pathetic beauty.

It was at this time of year that Mrs. Raven had entered the Court as a bride. The trees were clad in crimson and amber, just as they had been that day. She would have liked to speak of it. She glanced at Evelyn. The girl sat beside her, with lips half parted in a smile. Evelyn had her own thoughts, and they were evidently pleasant enough; but they were not of the peaceful glory stretching around her: she did not seem to see it. Mrs. Raven sighed and relapsed into silence.

But Miss Evelyn Agate was quite on the alert when the carriage drew up at the hall-door. Her short return to the simplicities of such a house as the Connells' had made her more than ever sensitive to the charm of spacious and lofty chambers, of velvet carpets, and all the thousand "appliances" of wealth and luxury. She liked, too, to see the crowd

of servants: and she did not, for the moment, miss Leonard.

"The Squire has gone into the town to a committee meeting, madam," explained Budd, the butler. "He said he could hardly be home before you got here, but he should not be long after you."

"Very well," said Mrs. Raven. "I suppose tea is ready for us. Charity, I shall need no help but yours. Mackay, you can attend to the trunks, and see if Miss Agate needs anything."

The first question Mrs. Raven put to the old servant was about Leonard: as to whether he had been quite well during her short absence.

"Much as usual, madam," answered Charity. "I must make bold to ask after Master Frank. I was living in hopes we should see him back with you to-day."

"He is quite well—very well, indeed," replied Mrs. Raven kindly. "He is going back to London for a little while, but I think we shall see him here very soon."

"Only the bad weather will be on us soon, too," observed Charity. "If he doesn't come very quickly, he'll come back to bare boughs. He is sorely wanted, madam; the house will never be the same till Master Frank's back in it."

"We all feel that, Charity," said her mistress.

"Aye, aye, madam; and you are not looking well yourself, either."

"I dare say not," said Mrs. Raven, "I dare say you were told by Mr. Leonard, Charity, that I came back so soon because I was ill: I dropped him a line to say so. And have you anything to tell me? Have there been changes here of any sort?"

Charity shook her head.

"Nothing of any account," she answered. "We have had no more tales, making believe to see that ghost, though maybe that's because nobody will go through the lanes at nightfall now. And I've made bold to get my bedroom changed, madam. I did that only two days ago, begging pardon for not asking

your leave first; but Mrs. Sims said she didn't think you'd mind."

"Not if it suits you better, Charity," said Mrs. Raven. "But what was amiss with your own? You have been in that room for more than twenty years."

It was a small room or closet, off the corridor on which Mrs. Raven's own apartments opened. Charity's confidential position, as half nurse, half maid, had made this personal proximity a very convenient arrangement years ago.

"Aye," said Charity, "I slept there first when you were expecting Master Frank, madam."

Mrs. Raven shivered. She did her best to hide it.

"A nice little room it is, too," pursued Charity, "and I liked it. Every way handier than the attic I've gone to. But a bedroom's made for sleeping in, madam, as you know. And I was going off my sleep there; and that does not do for an old woman."

"But why?" said Mrs. Raven.

"I was disturbed there," said Charity.

"What could disturb you now, after all these years?" asked her mistress wearily.

Charity laughed.

"The wind, madam," she said; "it's a way it blows sometimes—and then not for years again, it seems. It's like the cry of a child. I heard it when I was first in that room all those years ago. But my nerves were strong then, and I had plenty of work to do. I heard it again just after Miss Evelyn came to the Court; I dare say she'll remember I told her about it. And three or four days ago I heard it two nights running, nearly all the night. And the house seemed so odd and eerie like, and there seemed to be more folks about than one could see. And I wasn't going to give way to such fancies, knowing well with my reason that it was only the wind. So I changed the room. I suppose you have never noticed this wind, madam?"

"Never," said Mrs. Raven, and she changed the subject.

"Have many visitors called while I was away, Charity?"

"No," said Charity. "Mr. Brackenbury has been here once or twice. And Lord Weald's eldest son, who is up at their place just now, called and left his card; the master was out that day. And the Vicar came to dinner."

"And nothing has happened in the village?"

"Nothing, except that Eldred Sloam has hurt his leg. He hadn't been seen for a few days—not that anybody missed him—till it came out this morning that he was lying sick in his own cottage. His son James had not been home for days. The older James grows, the more he turns away from his father. And small wonder! Though for my own part I can never help pitying the poor miserable creature. Not that Eldred is anything to do with me."

The old woman knew that her mistress was aware that this man was, in a way, a link between herself and the Raven house. But she argued acutely enough in her own mind,

"If Eldred's nought to them, he's nought more to me; the simples are not bound to pick up what the gentles throw away."

"Who is taking care of him?" asked Mrs. Raven.

"Nobody," said Charity. "The like of him is nothing to anybody, madam. And it's well known the master is against him; always was. Mrs. Sims, she gave James one or two little things, beef-tea, or that, to take home to his father; and the boy is to sleep at home to-night; but there's no woman folk about."

"I'm afraid the poor man hasn't deserved much kindness from women's hands," observed the lady.

Charity gave a low laugh.

"It isn't those that deserve best that get most, from mothers, wives, or friends," she said. "I'll be glad to go and see him, if you'll let me, madam—I think I hear the master's voice speaking to Budd. Will you have your tea sent up here, madam, or will you come down to the dining-room?"

"I think you may send it here," was the answer. Mrs. Raven wanted to see Leonard alone, and knew that Evelyn would not join them in the boudoir unless specially invited. "And then go to Sloam's cottage, and take for him what you think best," she added, as Charity was leaving the room; "and see if you cannot hire somebody to attend a little upon him."

Leonard came in, tired and fretful, from his committee-meeting. He was vexed to find his mother back home so soon, especially as she was looking no better for her change, but worse; and he foresaw trouble for himself. And Leonard had a strong objection to all trouble except of his own manufacture, of which he always kept a plentiful supply.

He chose to take his tea standing on the hearth-rug, cup in hand. He made a few careless inquiries about the Connells—"Frank's new friends," he called them now, as if they had not the most remote connection with himself. Then he told Mrs. Raven that the Fishers, of the White Hart, were

wanting to break their old lease, and renew it on new terms, which he was quite determined not to agree to. He grumbled over Eldred Sloam's accident; he believed the man had been poaching when it occurred—and now he supposed it would end in his coming on the parish. *He* was not going to continue that ridiculous allowance to him: such a character ought to have been moved off the land years ago. All of which grated on Mrs. Raven, who felt unpleasantly conscious that it was by her intercession Eldred Sloam had been allowed to remain for this undesirable climax.

"And what is this nonsense about a strange figure walking up and down the Raven lanes?" asked Leonard. "I suppose you have heard of it—since Frank wrote to me about it while you and he were together. I am at a loss to imagine how he could trouble himself or me over such stuff."

"Frank feared it might be some undesirable character, I suppose," observed his mother, as she set down her cup and saucer. Her

hand was shaking so that the spoon rattled in the china.

"Who is it in the Connells' house that had seen it there?" he asked. "It's a queer thing anybody should have gone from this place to that. A nursery-maid, did Frank say?"

"The governess—a very pleasant young lady," answered Mrs. Raven patiently. "She only stayed one night here, at the White Hart; and was, I believe, returning from Gerstowe to the inn when she saw it."

Ought she to tell her son what had happened at Coltburn? He was certainly in no encouraging mood. But it would be wisest and best for her to tell him what he might so easily learn elsewhere. So, with an effort, she went on,

"There was an abortive burglary, or something of the sort, attempted on the house while I was at Coltburn. It was in the middle of the night, and this young lady, Miss Cleare, was standing at her bedroom window, Mrs. Connell with her. They

caught a glimpse of a figure on the lawn which the governess declared was like that she had seen in the lane here."

There was something else about that figure which Mrs. Raven might have added. But as nobody but herself could tell Leonard that, she kept silence.

Leonard gave a sardonic laugh.

"Oh, it appeared there in the character of a burglar, did it? It has a ghostly reputation here. I believe it is whispered that it was the cause of Sloam's accident——"

"Of Sloam's accident!" exclaimed Mrs. Raven.

"By causing him to try to leap a fence to avoid passing it, or something of that sort. Of course the plain truth is, he was tipsy. Everything that goes wrong for twenty miles round this house will now find some sort of excuse out of this got-up story."

He stopped to drink some tea before going on.

"Mr. Toynbee is very much annoyed about it. Worsfold, of the Pitchfork, seems

somehow to have become an authority on the subject, and all the men in the place spend their evenings in his taproom talking it over. I told Toynbee that I thought it was within the compass of his spiritual duty to go out with book and bell and exorcise the ghost. He said he couldn't exorcise what he didn't believe in. By the way, mother," Leonard added, with a change to a pleasanter tone "the old gentleman seems very much interested in your lady-companion. He has asked me ever so many questions about her; he fancies he has seen her before, or somebody so like her that it must be a relative."

Leonard looked at his mother. She did not speak.

"Toynbee thinks she or her people may have had Ravenstoke connections in years gone by. I told him I believed not; that she belonged to London entirely, was an orphan, and brought up by an aunt. I don't know how I remembered so much as that; but it's right, isn't it?"

"It will do very well," answered Mrs. Raven.

"You will be the better for a rest after your journey," said Leonard, who wanted to be set free that he might get to his accounts and memoranda, among which he usually passed his evenings.

Mrs. Raven assented drearily, and as Leonard left her boudoir by the one door, she went by the other into her bedroom.

As she was passing her window there, she started, and stood still. The scene was almost lovelier than it had been earlier in the afternoon, for now the calm sky was broken up into masses of ruddy gold, flaming in the west, and in the east gleaming amid warm violet shadows. But it was not the beauty of the sky which fixed Mrs. Raven s attention, and arrested her where she stood.

It was a sound of voices borne in by the rising breeze. The window, which was open, overlooked an undulating meadow intersected by a narrow path, the shortest route from the Court to the upper end of the village, avoid-

ing the avenue and the lodge-gate, and being the path to the warren.

There were two people in sight in the golden dusk, walking rapidly away from the Court. They were talking as they went. And one laughed.

One of these people was a short, bent old woman, who carried a basket covered with a white cloth. The other was a tall, slim girl, with a cloud-like red shawl flung round her shoulders, and a white garden-hat on her head.

Mrs. Raven knew who they were, and she knew where they were going. Yet did her heart sicken within her at the sight of the pair, and at the thought of the errand on which they must have started.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT DID THE VICAR SEE?

ON the evening of Evelyn Agate's return to the Court, she found herself full of that restless energy we often feel when we get back to familiar scenes after an absence.

Perhaps there was also something astir in her own mind which made it hard for her to settle down to a book, or other quiet occupation, after she had finished her tea, and found that Mrs. Raven did not require her.

First, she wandered out upon the hall-steps, and looked this way and that, just as people may do who expect to see somebody who will be visible by-and-by.

A triumphant spring lay in her gait, a vivid touch of colour on her cheeks, which usually lacked it. It was no wonder that Charity, coming out behind her, noticed this.

"You are the better for your visit, young madam, if the mistress is not."

There had been times when the old woman's unprefixed remarks had jarred Evelyn as a liberty taken with her dependent position. But she did not notice that now.

"Where are you going?" she asked, lightly raising the white cloth which covered the basket that Charity carried.

"To see a sick man," replied Charity. "If you were like Lord Weald's daughters you'd come with me. The gentry know that's the way to keep poor folks in heart."

Now Evelyn had no philanthropic instincts. She hated poverty hiding away in small close rooms: she had no pity for the little troubles which make life weary to common people. And of infection she had a positive terror.

But she would sacrifice a great deal to be like Lord Weald's daughters, or rather to seem like them, for she certainly would never trouble herself to acquire the sympathetic manners and patient courtesy of those gracious maidens. Only the poor themselves know how different some of their visitors are, and how different is the influence they leave behind them.

"What is the matter with the man?" she asked. "Is it anything catching?"

"It's a bruised leg—but it's rather bad," answered Charity, walking on.

"Has he got a grumbling wife and a dozen little pigs of children?" inquired Miss Evelyn.

Charity laughed, her old, scornful laugh.

"It is Eldred Sloam," she said; "the page's father."

"Oh yes, Eldred Sloam; I have heard his name before: a queer character, I believe. If you'll wait while I get my hat and shawl, I'll come with you, Charity. I dare say he'll be rather interesting."

Charity opened her mouth, perhaps to object, but closed it again. She waited while Evelyn ran indoors.

"The mistress didn't tell me much about Master Frank," began the old woman, as they walked along. "How is he? I wonder he didn't want to come home!"

"I expect he'll come soon," replied Evelyn. "And I dare say he'll stay long enough when he does come."

"And is Miss Connell very nice and pretty?" asked Charity artfully, with a side-long glance at her companion.

"Miss Connell!" echoed Evelyn, who felt as if she had nearly forgotten Louisa's existence. "Oh, she is nice enough. A weak sort of girl. One of the kind who make the heroines of old songs."

"It will be only natural for the mistress to be pleased if she and Master Frank take to each other," remarked Charity, in a matter-of-fact way.

Evelyn stood still with astonishment. Had Charity got this idea from her mistress? "I

never heard of it," she cried. "I saw nothing to lead to such a notion. Miss Connell is in love with somebody else, poor silly girl: and as for Mr. Frank, at present he has eyes for nobody, except his aunt's governess."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," remarked Charity. "Young men's love affairs are like children's teeth: the first that come are only meant to go."

"Ah, but this is quite a delightful romance," cried Evelyn, glad of a sympathetic ear to which to impart the bitterness towards Alice, hitherto kept latent in her own heart; and if Mrs. Raven, of Ravenscourt, could repose confidence in this woman, who was above a common servant, why should not she?

"When they met this time at Coltburn," she went on, "it was with recognition, for they had met before. The sweet young person, who is nevertheless a pearl of wisdom and propriety, had been strolling about the Raven lanes at midnight some time back, and meeting Mr. Frank, had claimed his

protection against that mysterious twilight pedestrian about whom, if you remember, you once told me."

"Then that's the girl who asked the questions at the White Hart," exclaimed Charity. "And so she went off to live with the Connells, did she? That's not accident; no, no. Something lies at the bottom of all things that happen in that curious way. What's her name, please?"

"Alice Cleare."

"Alice Cleare!" repeated the old woman to herself, as if trying whether she could recall the name. But she said no more, for by this time they were near Sloam's cottage.

It was one of those dwellings so familiar to all who know the deep green lanes and sunny dells of the southern English counties. The low palings of its front garden stood back from the road, and the garden sloped downwards to the house, whose low walls were so covered with creepers—now in their deepest shade of crimson—and its heavy-eaved roof so rich in moss, that the building

itself seemed to belong to Nature almost as much as the bracken-clad bank which rose immediately behind it. A few flower-borders, a cat washing her face on a clean window-sill, an old dame knitting in the porch, or a little child at play before the door, would have made the whole a picture for a poet's admiration, or a rich man's aimless envy.

But the cottage inhabited by Eldred Sloam had none of these charming finishing touches.

Rank grass encroached on the narrow path, while yet the low wild bushes on either side were here and there trampled down, as by the frequent passing to and fro of unsteady feet. In one of the small, deep windows a pane of glass was broken, and rudely mended with an ill-hewn board. Some battered tins and other domestic utensils stood about the door, as if set down in haste and then forgotten. Signs of neglect and desolation lay everywhere.

But, at least, the sick man was not lying

alone in his misery. At the moment when his visitors drew near enough to hear his heavy groans, they also heard a voice speaking to him in a tone of exhortation, not untouched by pity.

"It is the Vicar!" whispered Charity. But she walked straight in, and Mr. Toynbee rose at once and welcomed her, before he noticed that she was accompanied by anyone. For the good man was always glad to testify his respect for the character which Charity bore—that of a faithful and long-attached servant. He did not like the woman, and was sorry she was not a living recommendation of her manifold virtues. But he could not help that.

"I am glad to see you, Mrs. Hale," he said; "our poor friend is suffering terribly in every way. And this is kind of you, Miss Agate! But you begin your good works among the poor with a trying case," he whispered.

"Well," said Charity, approaching the sick man with no kind greeting, "I always told

you what would come of your drinking, Eldred."

"Other folks hurt their legs as well as I," growled a voice from the bed, "even tee-totallers. I never did it before."

"How was it?" asked Charity. "You got a fright, didn't you? That's what people are saying."

Mr. Toynbee interposed. "I have been speaking to Eldred about that," he said; "and have, I think, arrived at the truth. Eldred frightened himself."

"What did you think you saw, my man?" cried Charity, in a half-coaxing, half-mocking tone.

"You would have thought it something queer had you seen it yourself," retorted the sick man.

"It was a wheelbarrow, drawn out from the shed in Ash Lane, and standing on its end with the shafts in the air," explained Mr. Toynbee. "As Eldred came along, he saw, not it, but its shadow in the moonlight, and it looked to have a very strange appearance:

and he, not being quite so sober as he should have been, tried to leap the hedge. That's how it was, Mrs. Hale."

Charity gave a slighting laugh. "If you took it for Old Nick, Eldred, begging the Vicar's pardon, did you think the leaping over a hedge could save you? Or what did you fancy it was?"

"What I had seen before, and I didn't want to see it again," answered Eldred, tossing in his bed. "When you have been startled by a real ghost once, as I was, it is but natural to think one may see it a second time."

"You never saw any ghost, Sloam," expostulated the Vicar uneasily. He thought he had effectually silenced the story of the cause of Sloam's accident, by getting him to confess it to be what the Vicar believed it was —a drunken man's scare at an unaccustomed shadow. For Eldred had been picked from the ditch by some early labourers, still pointing and gibbering at the shadow, growing dim in the dawn. The man had

submitted rather sullenly to the Vicar's kindly remonstrances and ridicule. It was only when emboldened by Charity's presence, that he had ventured to argue on his own score.

"They say it's the old Squire himself that walks," persisted the invalid. "I have seen him in the lanes—though I should never have known who it was but for being told, for he died when I was a baby. He has walked at times, I can say that; and if he is walking again now, take my word for it that it's for no good—there's trouble ahead."

Mr. Toynbee could strenuously deny the possibility of Squire Eldred's reappearance on the scenes of his earthly life, but he certainly could plead no good as to his character when alive or his present intentions; so he was discreetly silent.

"If he is to walk, I know who else ought to walk too," said Eldred; "and that's my mother. She might have a word to say as well as he, I reckon. But the quality get

everything their own way, even to 'walking,' I suppose."

"My poor man," urged the Vicar, "you should not indulge in such thoughts as these. If, in your past life, you have been injured by the deeds of others, you must leave those others to the judgment of God. Do not fear that they can escape from that. You have only one enemy whom you should hate, and I fear you see too many excuses for him. He is yourself."

"You don't know much about it, Vicar," moaned the sick man. "You don't know how it feels to be in the world with a black mark against your name; and the sight of what might have been yours, but for wrongs and wrongs, always before your eyes."

"I know it is hard," confessed Mr. Toynbee, "but listen, Eldred: other men, born and bred like you, have refused to be injured by the same wrongs. They have turned evil into good, and lived to be esteemed and respected. These good men have taken warning not to bring the evil upon others

which they have found so hard to bear. Did you ever think of that? Are there no ghosts in your own heart, far, far more terrible than this fancied ghost of old Squire Eldred?"

Evelyn had sat down on a chair behind Charity. The dusty windows let in little light at best, and now that the sun was down, the low room would have been almost dark, only that the eyes of those within it had grown accustomed to its obscurity. As the clergyman made his appeal, Evelyn rose softly and peered over Charity's shoulder, to see how the sick man took it.

Certainly she did not anticipate what happened. Eldred Sloam started up in bed; his wild, white figure gleaming in the gloom around him. His pillow had been in the darkest of shadows, but now a lingering ray of light fell on his tangled masses of dusky dark red hair, and illumined his handsome countenance, distorted with fear now.

He flung out his arms with a sort of yell.

"What has she come for?" he shrieked. "I did not kill her—though you all looked at me then as if you thought I did. Take her away! Take her away! Let her stay away now, after all these years. She ran away, I tell you, from me as much as she did from the rest of you; I never knew where, never knew. No, no, I never killed her. I may have been bad in some ways, but not as bad as that."

That he was desperately frightened was plain to be seen. Mr. Toynbee wondered whether the man's drinking habits had induced a fit of delirium. He whispered the question to Charity.

"I think not," she answered. "I never heard that he was attacked like that. But I suppose it is sure to happen in time."

"You see his imagination draped that wheelbarrow, or its shadow, with a fantastic dreadfulness."

"Ay, but he was in drink then: he is sober now. Any way, it is all the outcome of Squire Eldred's ill deeds," added Charity,

with asperity, as she set herself to the task of soothing the terror, bending over the sick-bed with a tenderness that the Vicar had not thought it was in the power of the hard old woman to show. And then he recalled what had almost faded from his memory—the remote and unacknowledged tie existing between this unfortunate man and the honoured, respectable domestic of the great house. He should be sorry if anything in his words or tone had jarred Charity's feelings.

"Look here, Eldred," he said, cheerily, when quiet had supervened: "you know you must forgive all who have ever wronged you, especially if they ask it. And if your worst enemy is yourself, well, you must forgive him too, if he's sorry, and means to mend. And you must dwell on the brighter side of things, my man. We will get a nice nurse for you, and she'll rub up your house, and put matters straight and tidy. You'll be comfortable yet, if you choose."

Eldred groaned.

"I see your son James yonder, coming along," resumed the Vicar. "Remember what a good and dutiful boy he is. Had you been the best of fathers, you could not have had a better son. If we lose some of what we think are our rights, I'm sure we all get blessings that we don't deserve. You must not feel yourself forgotten: there will be plenty to help you, if you are willing to be helped. See, here's this kind young lady come all the way from the Court with Charity, just to see what you may want, and what can be done for you. Don't you mean to thank her?"

He drew Evelyn gently forward as he spoke, fully believing his own view of things —that she had come out of pure benevolence.

Eldred Sloam tossed his pillowed head in her direction, then raised it weakly and wearily enough, and peered at her for a moment. Evelyn started back. What a wild, rough, passion-torn face it was just then— like something which had haunted the troubled

dreams of a fever she had had in childhood! Whatever else Eldred Sloam saw, he saw no pity, no womanly relenting in her averted eyes and repellent mouth. With another heavy groan, he hid his face in his lean and heated pillow, and drew the tumbled bed-clothes over it.

But the Vicar had seen the two faces as they each gazed at the other.

James Sloam came in. Charity lifted from her basket the food and comforts which she had brought. She could do no more that night, but she promised to be there again in the morning, and she bade James not to leave his father until then. Saying good-night, she went out with Evelyn.

The Vicar stole close to Eldred Sloam's bedside. He still lay muffled up, groaning heavily. He neither moved nor spoke, though Mr. Toynbee softly called his name once, twice, thrice. The pastor's heart ached for this lost sheep of his flock.

"There is always forgiveness with God," he said, gently. For now he could guess

what new horrors had rushed upon that poor half-maddened brain, and smote that hardened heart: "always forgiveness and comfort to be found with the ever-merciful God!"

"What an awful creature!" exclaimed Evelyn, drawing a long breath, as she picked her way among the trailing weeds of the neglected garden. "And how difficult it is to believe," she added, for she knew what general gossip said of Eldred's birth, "that a wretch like that, with his matted hair and dirty hands, can have the most remote connection with a good family like the Ravens. Compare him with the perfect Mr. Leonard!"

"Mr. Leonard's face can't be compared with *his*," said Charity grimly. "Put 'em together, and see. Or his figure, either."

"Well, it is good of the Ravens to be kind to a man whose very existence must bring painful thoughts to them."

Evelyn tripped on gaily as she spoke, all unconscious that, in the twilight, Charity's face was darkening at her words.

"Aye," she said bitterly, in response to the girl's last remark, "a drop of kindred blood will do about as much for you as years of faithful service; and everybody knows *that's* no inheritance. But there are some people, all cockered up now with pride and vanity, who may not be any better in birth than even Eldred Sloam."

Mr. Toynbee walked away from Sloam's cottage slowly and thoughtfully, glancing before him at the swiftly receding figures of Charity and Evelyn on their road to the Court. When he reached home, his old housekeeper missed his usual cheery greeting. She said to the gardener that the master was "thinking of something uncommon deep." They concluded that they would find it out in next Sunday's sermon.

In the Rembrandt-like lights and shadows of Sloam's low, gloomy room, the Rev. Jasper Toynbee had had a revelation. He knew now why Evelyn Agate's face had been familiar to him.

The next morning a strange whisper was

going round among the Court servants. This time again it was wafted in from the Pitch-fork. Worsfold, cutting across the fields after midnight—(he had been to Sloam's cottage, he said, but what had been his business there he did not add)—had seen two figures walking slowly in Ash Lane. Who of flesh and blood would walk slowly there, at that hour? Worsfold had looked long enough to see that the figures were those of a man and a woman —the woman in a light green print dress and white cap, like the Court domestics wore. Surely they had all been safely housed, thought Mrs. Sims, looking round upon them rather suspiciously.

"The man wasn't the big figure that we've all either seen or heard on," was Worsfold's testimony. "It's a queer business altogether. Eldred himself was raving-like, last night, and saying his mother had as good right to 'walk' as his father—mayhap better. If it had been the big figure and a woman with him, I'd have thought Eldred's words were come to pass."

Mrs. Sims had her reflections on this narrative, as it was repeated to her.

"Salome Hale used to wear a green print dress," she said. "I've seen pieces of it made up in old Dame Sloam's patchwork quilt—the old woman that she lived with, you know.—I dare say there's bits of that still lying about in Eldred's cottage. Was the child that was taken away when Salome died a boy or a girl? It always run in my mind it was a girl. But one's memory is often deceitful."

"Are you thinking these new figures might be Salome herself and her child come back to keep Squire Eldred company in his walking?" whispered an imaginative housemaid.

"I didn't say so, child," said Mrs. Sims sharply. "I need all my thoughts for my own business, and so do you, I reckon."

CHAPTER III.

AN ANONYMOUS LETTER.

THE first departure from any gathering leaves behind it a sense of its impending end. So, with the going away of Mrs. Raven and Evelyn: the Connell household became aware that it was speedily to contract to its ordinary dimensions.

Philip's visits among the neighbours took on a farewell tone, and all plans were made under the constant sense of "what we ought to do before we go away."

Philip himself was beginning to feel a strong sense that no man has a right to be happy except at the post of duty. It was

a statement which poor Mrs. Connell did not attempt to gainsay; only, not being a Spartan mother, she dropped a tear upon it.

As for Frank, during those fleeting days he lived an enchanted life. What mattered the darkness gathering round him when it only served to set off the first sweet rays of that heavenly light which we call love?

The good minister thought that the lad was very bright and brave in all his perplexities. Neither he nor Mrs. Connell suspected the sudden comfort he had found in a new-born love, and if they had, it might have seemed to be only an additional aggravation of his position. Not to them, perhaps; for they were both romantic beyond the romance of youth, as middle-aged people always are, if they are so blessed as to retain any romance at all. Yet, looked at from the outside, a new reason for desiring the advantages and enjoyments of rank and wealth does not seem likely to reconcile us to their absence.

But new-born love asks nothing for its own existence. It does not even see its reflection in the depths of the loved one's soul. It suffices unto itself. It does not long to gain, but to give. It does not fear silence, or separation, or even death. Like an innocent babe in the cradle, it confides itself to a world of which it knows nothing. And the wisest angel knows only that he can do naught else. Therefore happy are they whose love, beside a grave, regains the self-surrender, the spirituality, the utter fearlessness of its dawn.

Only Philip understood the new light on Frank's face, the fresh animation in his voice, the vivid energy and colour of his thoughts.

Philip wagged his head knowingly (knowing how little !) and said to himself—

"Frank has found fairy gold as well as fifty pounds. Well, well, he can afford to look for that sort of thing, for of course he'll be rich enough some day. Madam Raven can't keep him out of his fortune in the end. 'Bread-and-cheese and kisses' are very nice

for lunch, when there's sure to be a good dinner in due time. But I'll bet a hundred pounds (that's quite safe, as I haven't got them) that this was no part of the 'Oriental Mystery's' prophecy! And wouldn't mother be vexed if she suspected it! Not that she'd not think Miss Cleare quite good enough for Frank, but it would trouble her that it should have happened here, as if we, the mésalliance establishment, had encouraged another mésalliance! Why shouldn't we? Noblesse oblige! For my own part, I can't think what Aunt Raven can be thinking of, to have a young lady companion—a palpable risk to two unmarried sons! Perhaps that's why she doesn't want Frank at home. I think he could be trusted in that quarter. So could I. Yes, I could, even if Miss Evelyn had a million of money. A million? Well, draw it mild, say ten thousand pounds, or any other trifling sum that wouldn't divide into a decent competency for each to live on at a different side of the world! A million would split so nicely—I might do even this

on a million. She's not a lady, isn't Miss Evelyn; her very soul is vulgar, and it shows through her beauty, like a coarse factory girl in a Court dress! I wonder, sometimes, if that shriek in the night may not have been some hanky-panky trick of hers? Had it been she, instead of Alice Cleare, who went to that window in the nick of time to see that bothersome being in the garden, I might have said she was at the bottom of the whole affair."

Such were Philip's reflections, as he went out to say some farewells on the afternoon of the day previous to his and Frank's departure for London. He left the house very still. Percy was closeted in the library, doing some copying for his father. The minister himself was out visiting among his poor, and would probably look in upon the detectives before his return. Louisa was in her own room lying down, for she was so unmistakably unwell, that it had become fruitless to struggle against the symptoms of indisposition. The little girls were at their

books. Frank was wandering about, looking for his aunt or Alice Cleare.

New-born love was wide awake now. Its sweet dreamy infancy was over. The pain of parting had aroused it.

Frank had never played at being in love, so that he had not to pay that terrible penalty of doubt in the significance and permanence of his own feelings, which always follows that dangerous pastime.

If he had been the rich man's son he had once dreamed himself, or if he had been a working man with a trade in his hand, he would have gone straight to Alice Cleare, and laid his fate in her decision.

But could he dare approach with words of love the child of any well-guarded house, the daughter of any shrewd and watchful father, while he had no settled present, no hopeful future, and had reasons to doubt whether he had even a name? Frank's small knowledge of the world sufficed to answer that question in the negative.

Therefore, could he presume on Alice's

orphaned loneliness, on the impulses of a warm, womanly heart, which would only see in his disadvantages stronger pleas for his suit?

"No," said Frank to himself, "no; a thousand times no."

Was he right, or was he wrong? For there is nothing in this world better than pure and honest love. Many lesser blessings may be needed to bring all its happiness to full fruition, but when they cannot be had, it itself still remains, the best of all. Therefore why should Alice, because her life had been deprived of so much, go deprived of this also? But there are some mistakes which the noblest natures make most readily.

"I am sure she likes me," said poor Frank to himself. "She likes me well enough to be friends with me; to feel it pleasant even to know that I like her. If I get a chance to be kind to her, I don't think it will make her angry. But I have made up my mind that, before I leave her now, I shall tell her what the witch said about my birth. I

should not like her to hear that rumour from anybody but myself."

So, going in search of her, he stepped out into the garden, where he had seen her pass half an hour before. The garden-seat was empty.

He walked along the path in front of the house and turned its corner. There was very little garden at the back, only a grassy slope, and a clump of trees, few of which had attained their full size.

On the grass, standing on the dry leaves already lying thickly round the largest oak-tree, were Mrs. Connell and Alice Cleare. Mrs. Connell was enveloped in a large shawl, thrown over her head. They were talking earnestly, and Alice had a sheet of paper in her hand, which she looked at, as if it was the subject under consideration. They both heard Frank's footsteps and turned towards him.

"We are very glad to see you," said his aunt. "We have something here, Frank, which we think you ought to see."

"It came by this afternoon's post," added Alice, handing him the paper, and looking anxiously at him as she did so.

"And Miss Cleare very sensibly brought it straight here to me," observed Mrs. Connell: who, by the signs of her basket, had been searching for pretty faded leaves for household decoration.

"It seems half a disgrace to have to talk over such matters," added Alice, in a low voice.

She had handed Frank an envelope and a folded half-sheet of paper. The few words upon it were written in the same mysterious caligraphy with which Frank was already familiar. They ran as follows:

"Let those who, not being of Raven blood, see the Raven ghost, beware of all who bear the Raven name."

Frank turned over the envelope. Its superscription was in the same handwriting. It bore the post-mark of "Gerstowe."

"You remember I was coming from Gerstowe the night I met it," whispered

Alice. "It is where my brother died—where he lies buried."

"My dear, I think you both brave and good not to get frightened over this," said Mrs. Connell approvingly. She was pleased with Alice's confidence in her. This girl evidently knew what was the right thing to do, and did it.

Frank lost himself in thought. He was recalling Evelyn's laughing face as she had come downstairs on the morning of her departure, the letter she had not chosen to speak about in her hand. Could that letter have been a missive similar to this?—except probably of exactly opposite purport? If so, then at least it would seem that Evelyn could have no complicity in the plot, whatever it might be.

"We must tell my husband of this when he comes home," said Mrs. Connell, gathering up her fragile treasures and preparing to move towards the house. "It may be best for all of us who are cognisant of this matter to be perfectly frank with each

other. One never knows at what tiny point the clue to a chain of evidence may begin."

"May I keep this paper, Miss Cleare?" Frank asked, in a low voice, as they followed the elder lady along the garden path.

"Certainly you may," she replied.

"You will not object to my showing it to the detectives?"

"No," Alice answered, with only the slightest possible hesitation.

"There is a special reason why I should like to do so," he explained. "When we opened the packet, which you and I found in the flower-pot, there lay with the gold a slip of paper; it was inscribed with this same handwriting. Now, I have not felt free to show that slip to the detectives, because it brings in the name of a person whom it is not desirable to mix up with this affair, if it can be avoided. Somebody who, from me at least, knows of nothing of all that I have already told you; or of that which I wish to tell you now."

Alice gave him a quick glance, as if a sudden thought crossed her mind.

"Should you chance to guess who that individual is," said Frank, hurriedly, "please don't mention your conjecture to me. I might not be able to keep my face from answering whether you were right or wrong."

"I beg your pardon if I looked as if I meant to speak," she replied. "Really, I did not."

"Now this slip that you have received involves no one, you see," Frank went on eagerly. "The only name mentioned in it is my own—that of Raven. I must get at the bottom of this affair, if possible, but I would like to do so without injury or annoyance to others."

"Keep the paper, certainly," said Alice, with greater frankness, "and do with it whatever you think right." She was looking at him with kind, beseeching eyes. Frank did not answer.

"Don't carry those things about with you," she continued, for her quick observation

detected the other slip of paper in the note-book, which he opened to put in this, received from her. "Lock them apart in your desk, Mr. Raven—though I daresay you think that sounds like a superstitious warning."

Frank smiled.

"If, as my father said, wisdom dwells in the secret thoughts of sensible people, I would not say that science might not use their fancies as hints for her onward path. But pray tell me, Miss Cleare, what harm my carrying these papers in my pocket-book can do?"

Alice gave her head a curious shake; as one does when saying something little likely to be believed.

"I think there may be a very subtle transmission of influence for good or evil," she said. "Why is it a comfort to us to wear little personal relics of those we love and value? Why is there a difference between the spiritual atmosphere of one house and that of another—a something which makes you feel suffocated in one and stimu-

lated in the other, though there may be no difference that eye or ear can detect?"

"There may be a great deal in these ideas," replied Frank. "I think so myself. But I know most people would call them fantastic."

Alice laughed.

"I wouldn't tell them to most people, Mr. Raven. Or, if I did, I should put the case differently. I might ask them whether they would feel hurt to discover they had accidentally worn the gloves of a dear friend? The probable answer would be No. I would then ask how it would be if they found they had worn the gloves of a terrible criminal—a murderer, say? And I know they would instinctively go and wash their hands."

"But, look here," said Frank. "If there is any *real* difference, they ought to feel it, to experience a subtle consciousness of it, before being told the facts."

"If they are sure there is no real difference," returned Alice, "then it must be they who are fantastic to go and wash their hands after they do know the facts!"

Frank smiled, without answering.

"Only it is always best to put away, as far as possible, that which we suspect is neither wholesome nor happy," spoke Alice, returning to her first suggestion. "It may do us harm: it cannot be good for us. Little precautions like these outrun science itself."

"I wonder how such ideas first came into your head, Miss Cleare?"

Mrs. Connell had gone into the house. They had paused, talking in the porch. But now they began to walk slowly back along the path.

"I think when most of those we love are dead," she said, in a low, soft tone, "our own soul and the souls of everybody around grow more real to us. Always yearning and reaching out towards the invisible, we get conscious of the invisible everywhere."

"I shall often think about you, and all you have said when I am back in London again," Frank observed, after a short pause, for her words asked no reply. "You do not know

how often I thought of you when I did not expect ever to see you again. It seems to me as if I had known you always."

But here he checked himself. This was not what he had meant to tell Alice Cleare.

"You promised to be my friend, Miss Cleare," he resumed, speaking suddenly, and his voice changed from softness to a low, distinct energy. "I cannot leave Coltburn without telling you something which a friend ought to know—especially after your receiving that note, and trusting me as you have done."

In a few brief words he filled up the blanks he had left in the previous account he had given Alice of his interview with the mysterious woman. He told her everything except the allusions to "E. A." He even went so near that as to say that his future wife had been indicated in an unlikely, nay, in an impossible, person.

Alice listened very quietly, without any expression of sympathy. When he had finished, she looked up at him, and spoke.

"You will not forget what I said to you

the other day, Mr. Raven—when we found the packet."

"No, never," Frank answered fervently.

The gate clanged at that moment, and they both turned. It was the minister coming in. And up to that moment it had not struck Frank as strange, that Alice Cleare did not seem surprised at his singular recital.

"Any news, uncle?" asked Frank.

Mr. Connell shook his head.

"None whatever," he answered. "I have now come from the police-station, but the detectives at present are at fault. They have hunted up ever so many people who visited this woman, Miss Beck's servant-girl among them. But they can get no clue which leads anywhere, not even a good personal description of her. She had always kept her face in some kind of concealment; not one of them saw it properly. With them all she seems to have acted only as the commonest kind of fortune-teller, and to have been very eager for her fees."

Frank threw a questioning glance at Alice

Cleare. She understood it, for she nodded assent, and then turned and disappeared within the house.

"Uncle Connell," said Frank, "we have something more to tell you. Miss Cleare received a note this afternoon, which she carried at once to Mrs. Connell, and which I will now show you. The handwriting is the same as that on the paper in the packet," he added, taking out his pocket-book, "as you will see."

Mr. Connell put on his spectacles and peered thoughtfully at the document.

"Have you told her anything?" he asked, in a low tone.

"Everything. Except—except—" Frank's voice had dropped to a still lower key.

"Well, well, I think you were right," said Mr. Connell. "Frankness clears off many mischievous mistakes. Yes, I think you were right in your confidence, Frank; and certainly right in your single reservation, which I quite understand. I have not the least doubt of Miss Cleare."

"Doubt of her!" echoed Frank. "No, Uncle Connell, there can be no doubt of *her!*" And then he remembered his own misgivings concerning Evelyn Agate, and how cruel and unjust they would sound to any who loved her, since even an expression of confidence seemed to him like an insult to Alice Cleare.

Louisa Connell came down to supper that evening looking so haggard, and speaking with such manifest nervous irritability, that her father and mother and Philip held a little consultation about her later. Under Philip's advice she had been kept in ignorance of the treasure found in the blue-rimmed vase. But now that the post seemed to have become an engine in the hands of the mysterious night intruder, or else of the mysterious wise-woman, agitation and terror might possibly reach Louisa through it.

The result of this consultation was, that before the minister went to bed, he paid a visit to their faithful servant in the kitchen.

"Minton," he said, "will you take care and

meet the postman yourself for a few mornings until I give you further instructions? Watch for him also in the afternoon. All letters he may give you, no matter to whom they may be addressed, bring straight to my study. Should I happen to be out, take them to your mistress. I wish to glance at their envelopes before distributing them to their owners. Mrs. Connell and my sons know of this arrangement, and I don't suppose my servants will object," he added, loyal to his Radical and Independent views of the rights of the individual.

"It would be onreasonable if they did, sir," said Minton, dropping her old-fashioned curtsey. "I'm sure the mistress, and you too, sir, would be quite welcome to see a letter of mine if it ever came for me—which it don't. As to Julia, it have not come to post-letters for her yet, sir, and I'll take care it doesn't for one while. Yes, sir, you may depend on me: I'll bring you all the postman leaves."

Next morning, Philip and Frank took their

departure for London. On their way to the train, they called at the police-station to leave the anonymous letter sent to Alice Cleare, and to communicate their metropolitan address. It was the courteous and chatty Mr. Jones who received them.

"Oh, oh," said he, scanning the paper. "The Raven ghost, eh! Strikes me this is the best clue you've brought us yet, gentlemen. Don't you be surprised, sir"—turning to Frank—"if you get a visit from somebody you've not seen before," he added, as he took down the London address. "We are doing our best ourselves. from a public point of view—but perhaps I ought to tell you that Mr. Cran is not exactly one of us now. He has just retired from the service on his pension. But a good case is to him what a fox is to a hound: and he can now do things which we might not feel inclined to undertake officially. I wouldn't take upon me to say that he has not got his eye fixed somewhere in Ravenstoke already," added the speaker, in a marked tone of meaning. "But he

won't bother you, sir; that's not Cran's way. As soon as he has anything worth your hearing, sir, you'll hear; not before."

Frank returned his thanks as he left the police-station with Philip. And then—away!

And the last glimpse they caught of Coltburn was of the dingy walls and sordid windows of Daylight Villa.

Philip recovered his somewhat flagging spirits the moment he set foot on London pavement. Frank followed him, rather quietly, to the snug, shadowy Temple Chambers. He felt that eerie sense of unreality which we all feel when we return to a familiar scene, after undergoing a new and strange experience. Was this real, or that? He could have almost asked himself whether there was such a place as Coltburn, while the vaticinations of the "Oriental Mystery" seemed but as the intricacies of a night-mare. But—there was Alice Cleare! If she was a dream, then she was of those dreams which come but once in a lifetime, and are never forgotten.

Philip's letters had been sent punctually to him at Coltburn, therefore he did not expect to find many awaiting him. One only lay on his table, delivered by that morning's post.

He took it up with an exclamation of pleasure. For it was from his old friend, Gertrude Agate. And it seemed like a welcome back to the best side of his London existence. It was but short.

"DEAR MR. CONNELL,

"I am told you and your cousin are likely to be back in London by the time this will reach the Temple. Will you both come over and see me as soon as you conveniently can? I want you rather particularly. I have just had a letter from Evelyn; and unless Mr. Frank has had very recent advices from the Court, he may like to see it, for it has little bits of news which will be interesting to him. Not that I am dragging you here about that, but to ask your advice concerning a very different matter, which has filled my-

self with perplexity, and aroused the nervous terrors of my poor servant, Mary Davies. Do come as soon as you can.

"Faithfully yours,

"GERTRUDE AGATE."

"Read it, Frank!" exclaimed Philip. "We will go to her this very evening."

CHAPTER IV.

A TELEGRAM FROM THE COURT.

THE shades of the October afternoon had gathered on the Temple, when Philip Connell quitted his chambers for Miss Agate's house, arm-in-arm with Frank. The London twilight seemed intolerably thick and sultry after the comparative freshness round the paternal domain of the Connells, even in dirty Coltburn.

The lamp was already lit in Miss Agate's parlour, but the curtains were not yet drawn, and as the cousins drew near the house, they got a full view of the quaint interior. Miss Agate sat at her writing-table, her clasped hands lying on a huge volume open before her. She was talking earnestly, yet with

that calmness which is always the sign of intensest feeling in women of her type, to her attendant, Mary Davies. Mary Davies was not standing in her usual humble, deprecating attitude, but was sitting in a chair, with bent figure, as if some burden of grief or terror had crushed all ceremony out of her.

"I wonder what is up," whispered Philip as he rang the bell, which was not answered so promptly as usual, and it was Miss Agate herself who opened the door at last. She brought her accustomed bright yet wistful face to welcome them.

"I am so glad to see you," she said. "Oh, so glad!"

She walked before them into the little parlour, empty then.

"If there has been anything troubling you, Miss Agate," said Philip, "you should have let me know about it at once."

He spoke with simple sincerity. He had a deeper regard for the little lady than she realized. Gertrude Agate never expected anything for herself from anybody.

"It has only happened lately," she answered.

"What is it? Nothing wrong with your brother, I trust?"

"Oh no," she replied. "It is really nothing wrong with anybody, only it is an unaccountable thing, and seems to indicate that some sort of mischief may be brewing somewhere. I think it was incautious of me to tell Davies about it. She has taken it up with so much terror as to quite unnerve me. And I suppose sensible people should be above being frightened by anonymous letters."

"Anonymous letters!" echoed Frank.

Miss Agate turned upon him brightly.

"Yes!" she said. "It's very dreadful, isn't it? But I suppose such things have to be encountered sometimes, like mud and dust. They only began to come three or four days ago. But they come now regularly every morning. And their purport is, that I should take Evelyn from Ravenscourt. They beseech me, appealing to my feelings—they threaten me, appealing to my terrors;

but that one thing is always their burden."

"What is their postmark?" asked Philip.

"Each letter has a different one," she answered, "but all date from villages near Ravenstoke. Davies knows all the places."

"I don't like to be suspicious," said Philip, "though human nature generally justifies it: but is it possible that Davies herself has any hand in getting these letters sent to you? She was very fond of Miss Evelyn—is she determined to get her back at any cost? Or, stay! Did you not say that she had once lived in those parts—can she have some idea that Miss Evelyn may hear some story of her past life, which might cause you to part from her?"

Miss Agate shook her head.

"I am sure that your last suggestion is groundless," she said. "Mary knows me much too well to dream that I should turn against her for any past story, after her long, harmless years of patient toil beneath my

own roof. Besides, she had grown reconciled to Evelyn's absence."

"Can you let me see these letters?" asked Philip.

"Certainly," answered Miss Agate, rising. And Frank noticed that they were not stored among any of her papers, but that she fetched them from a little bag hanging beside the fireplace, in which she usually kept nothing but waste-paper. She carried them by the tips of her fingers and dropped them swiftly on the table. Her instinct was like Miss Cleare's.

There were three of these letters. Each was on only a half-sheet of paper. As Philip read each of them, he passed it on to Frank.

The messages were short enough. The first ran: "As you value the happiness and welfare of your adopted niece, send for her from Ravenscourt."

The second was: "Take a word of advice, or you will rue it. Send for your adopted niece before evil befalls her."

"This came this morning," said Miss

Agate, as she opened the third. "London is the place for Evelyn Agate. Keep her under your own eye. Beware of any face that may come to your house for the first time at this period."

Each missive was written in the same large, scrawling hand which Philip and Frank had learned to recognise—the horrible caricature of the late Squire's caligraphy. The two young men looked at each other.

"Do you wonder at my alarm?" asked Miss Agate.

Philip had rapidly made up his mind that something must be told.

"We have been growing accustomed to similar mysteries," he said, lightly. "My mother's governess received a letter only the day before we left Coltburn. I must confess that I fear this annoyance is due to an indiscretion committed by myself, Miss Evelyn, and my sister. A woman came to our town professing to be a fortune-teller, and we foolishly consulted her. Since then, we have had some unaccountable vexations; and

the worst of it is, they have not been confined to us, the real culprits."

"Evelyn never told me a word about all this," said Miss Agate, with a tone of reproach in her voice.

"Why should she?" asked Philip; "there was really nothing to tell. I don't suppose she set much store by her interview with the woman, and Miss Evelyn knew very little of subsequent events, for my father did not choose that a young lady, a guest in his house, should be worried by hearing of this kind of thing."

"Evelyn seemed to enjoy her visit to Coltburn so thoroughly," said Miss Agate. "The only trouble she alluded to was some alarm of people—burglars, I thought—lurking about the house at night. Do you think that had anything to do with this fortune-telling affair?"

"That we cannot tell," Philip answered, briskly. "That is exactly what we are trying to find out. We have our own sus-

picions, and have communicated them to the police."

"If this all originates in that fortune-teller," said Miss Agate, "it is probably only a vulgar plot to mystify and defraud. Yet one gets timid. Especially with Mary Davies weeping and wailing, and declaring that there is a curse over Ravenstoke, and——" she paused, suddenly remembering Frank. So she broke off with a question: "Do you really think I need not be afraid?"

Frank blushed to the forehead. Thinking constantly over these mysteries, he was beginning to see a certain method in them. He did not forget the message that had been found with the buried gold, nor yet the witch's hints during his personal interview with her.

"I don't think there is any fear," he said, hesitatingly. "The anonymous letter to—my aunt's governess, was in much the same strain. She had happened to pass through Ravenstoke once, and had seen a figure, which it appears passes for our family ghost. The

letter warned her that such a sight boded special ill to anybody not of the Raven race."

Miss Agate mused.

"That same cry of danger at Raven!" she said. "And, of course, Evelyn is not of the Raven race. But then, you don't believe in the ghost at all, Mr. Raven, do you?"

"It seems there can be no mistake about a mysterious figure of some sort," answered Frank. "As to its being a ghost, I think I have not quite made up my mind. Of course, one doesn't believe in such things in a general way, and yet——"

"One generally has one's own ghost story that one does believe," chimed in Philip.

"Can there be anybody at Raven who could find it to their interest to get Evelyn withdrawn?" mused Miss Agate; "anybody who may have been carrying on little peculations which the presence of an active and acute young lady might check? What do you think of that suggestion, Mr. Raven?"

"Oh no," cried Frank warmly; "the ser-

vants are all old servants, who could be trusted with untold gold."

"Possibly better than with carefully counted gold," said Philip drily. But the sarcasm fell unnoticed, for there came a sharp, hurried knocking on the wall of the room.

Miss Agate rose hastily.

"It is only my poor brother," she said. "I will go and tell him that I will be with him in a few minutes."

She went out, and came back hastily. The gentlemen had risen.

"No, no," she said. "My brother only wants to speak with me, and I will go to him presently. I can't let you go without consulting you definitely. You really do not think I should send for Evelyn? It seems like an insult to your family to ask such a question," she added, turning to Frank. "I should be sorry to send for her. Evelyn seems so thoroughly happy. Each letter is brighter than the last. What have I to offer her in exchange for all she has there? But then, this mysterious snake—this spy—this

traitor—hidden somewhere in the grass! And this story of the baleful ghost! Evelyn wrote something about it once, but I took it to be merely some old wives' tale. And she has alluded to it again in the letter I had last."

"Ah, you promised to read us that letter," said Philip, interested.

"So I will," answered Gertrude Agate, drawing it from her pocket.

But she could not hand them Evelyn's letter to read, because there were sundry phrases disparaging to Mrs. Raven and Leonard. She had to choose extracts, and leave blanks.

"'Everything here is very beautiful just now. The nights are frosty already, but the days are bright and fair. Mrs. Raven has had some new damask put on the drawing-room furniture—splendid stuff, which cost I know not how much per yard.'"

Then a little skipping was required.

"'I get on famously now with the old woman, Charity Hale, whom I didn't think I

should like at first. Her dry, hard manner, which I fancied was insolence, is only her way. Tell Mary Davies that Mrs. Hale has taken me to see her old friend, Eldred Sloam. Don't you remember how queer Mary turned that night when I teased her about him?'

"I didn't tell Mary Davies anything of the sort," interposed Miss Agate, parenthetically. "It is only Evelyn's nonsense;" and she resumed the letter:

"'This Eldred Sloam has been very ill. He hurt his leg running away from something when he was tipsy. Popular report at once whispered that it was the famous family ghost. Nothing was to be seen afterwards but a wheelbarrow standing on end. I went to see him with Mrs. Hale, and he behaved like a delirious lunatic when he saw me. The family are very good to him; Mr. Leonard has once threatened to turn him away; but they know better than not to be kind to him, for—'" again a judicious omission on Miss Agate's part. "'The ghost I

mentioned as "walking" is still going about. But now there are said to be two more ghosts in addition! The latest arrivals from Spiritland are a young man, and a woman, who is attired in a green gown: age uncertain. The village nerves are shaken to the last degree. This last report came to Mr. Leonard's ears, and he is very angry; he thinks it all nonsense. Mrs. Raven takes these stories to heart, somehow, though one cannot imagine she can be frightened by such things. Charity Hale is very queer over all the ghostly tales. I can't tell what she believes; she snubs the servants when she hears them speak on the subject. But when Mrs. Raven's maid was telling her mistress about the two new figures that have appeared at unearthly hours in the lane—now beginning to be known as the "Ghost's Walk"—Charity looked up from her work, and said "the wind round Ravenscourt was crying again." Isn't it strange, Aunt Gertrude, how people in this century can be so foolish?'

"There," said Miss Agate, "I think we must wait a little, and see what comes next. My nerves have grown quieter in merely talking out the whole thing. And now you are in town, I shall not feel so lonely in the matter: there is somebody to appeal to. Of course, I could not discuss anything relating to your family with anybody unconnected with it," she added, turning to Frank.

"Miss Agate," said Frank earnestly, "I don't believe there is anything at Ravenscourt that need alarm you. But you know there are histories and tragedies in all families." She smiled: for he quite forgot her own story, and went on to say, with some excitement, "Perhaps I shall have one to tell you some day. Your niece may have one, too."

"Must have one," said Miss Agate calmly. "The facts of Evelyn's life prove that. It will be odd if that history comes to light when we have quite left off expecting it."

There came again that heavy knocking at the wall. This time the raps followed

swiftly and sharply; there was no mistaking the peremptoriness of their summons. Miss Agate ran out of the room without a word.

"We must go the moment she comes back," whispered Philip. They could hear voices in the adjoining chamber: the one thin, shrill, and excited; the other soothing and sweet.

Miss Agate came back presently, with a slight appearance of agitation.

"I must not detain you longer," she said; "my poor brother has asked something he never asked before—never once all these years. He actually wanted to know who was in here: he had heard a voice, he said, and must know whose it was. He must have heard all the voices always, but he has never noticed one before. He is trembling. Some tone must have struck his wandering fancy. I think I must go and sit with him, and talk about Simonides and Theocritus. I always keep him off the Greek tragedies; his own

history is too like them. Come back as soon as you can."

"One was forced to come away in the conventional manner, I suppose," said Philip to Frank, as they hurried homewards, "for she would not have allowed us to stay. Nevertheless, Mr. Agate has once been the victim of a terrible mania, and one always wonders whether any agitating circumstance might not bring back the attack. But I am *sure* his sister would even die in his service; it could not be harder than the life she has lived for his sake."

The Temple Chambers were in gloom when they re-entered them. But, even at the first moment, there was light enough for Philip to see a yellow envelope on the table. He pounced upon it. Telegrams were not so common in those days as now, and an air of disaster, or at least of destiny, hung about them.

It was for Frank, from Mrs. Raven, and it summoned him thus:

"Come to Ravenscourt at once. Your brother is suddenly taken ill; and there are also great trouble and anxiety of other kinds."

CHAPTER V.

A DARK CUPBOARD AND A CLUE.

FRANK started for Ravenstoke in the early hours of the morning. He would reach the Court by breakfast-time. Philip saw him off.

Of all possible returnings to the Court, this which he was now making would have been the very last to enter Frank Raven's mind. Sent for by Mrs. Raven!—sent for, too, as a mainstay and refuge in a time of trouble!

When the train drew up at Ravenstoke Station, there was Mrs. Raven standing on the platform, awaiting it. This was a most unusual attention from her. Frank could

not remember her having ever shown it before to anybody, not even to his father. And over the low wall of the station, Frank could see the pony-chaise in charge of James Sloam.

Mrs. Raven put her hand into Frank's without a word of greeting, and looked up into his face with faded, tearless eyes.

"Your brother is very ill indeed," she said. "He has had an attack which seems like those of his childhood. But they say it is very significant now. The doctors tell me we must face the worst."

Frank had led her to the chaise while she spoke.

"You will drive me back yourself, please," she said. "James can return on foot."

"My cousin Philip asked me to telegraph to him, directly I met you," observed Frank, as he assisted her to her seat. "I suppose I may say all else is well except poor Leonard. For your telegram mentioned other troubles, and Philip is very anxious to offer his services if he can be of any use. Shall he come?"

Mrs. Raven hesitated.

"No," she decided; "at least, not just now. You can send for him afterwards, if you like."

"Then I must say that Leonard is very ill, but everybody else is safe and in good health?" said Frank.

"Yes," she answered, and added, speaking slowly: "About what was it that you had any anxiety?"

"Nothing exactly," Frank returned, "only through your telegram I understood something more was wrong. And Philip read the message too, and as he is to see Miss Agate this evening, his report of it might make her anxious."

Frank almost expected a rebuke for remembering anybody but themselves at such a time. But the lady only sighed. "Ah, yes, poor Miss Agate. Telegraph at once to Mr. Connell, Frank."

During their drive up to the Court, Mrs. Raven told her son the few bald facts at her command. After her return home, everything

had gone on as usual at the Court and in the village. Only, there had always been this disagreeable, unsettling gossip about the ghost, or rather the ghosts, though Worsfold's story—for he began it—seemed too trivial for serious reflection. But for Frank's letter of inquiry from Coltburn, this story might have been long in reaching Leonard's ears, for people are always the last to hear unpleasant things about their own houses and ancestors. But immediately on receipt of Frank's letter, Leonard had asked a few questions, and had received answers which roused a naturally indignant curiosity. And now, during the last few days—the time since Mrs. Raven's return—the rumour had grown bigger, and a new touch of sensation was added by the account of the woman-form with the white cap, and the old-style green print gown. Mrs. Raven looked earnestly at Frank as she communicated this last item. She could not guess that Frank was already in possession of it, through Evelyn's letter to Miss Agate.

"Oh, I have heard something of that,"

Frank said. "Miss Evelyn Agate mentioned it in a letter to her aunt, who repeated it to us when we were visiting her last night. I can understand how these things have annoyed Leonard: he should have heard nothing of them from me, if it had not seemed absolutely necessary."

Mrs. Raven shook her head mournfully.

"Your brother was very angry," she said. "As to the tall figure which the foolish people call 'Squire Eldred,' he believed it must be the man Sloam masquerading for some nefarious purposes of his own. But when he heard that Sloam was lying injured in bed, and had been himself alarmed by something he had met in the Warren—and when Worsfold's story was added, Leonard did not know what to think."

"Certainly it became impossible to imagine it was all delusion," observed Frank.

"So Leonard said at the time: if it was some underhand work, it was evidently extensively organized. And he determined to sift it to the bottom."

"What did he do?" asked Frank, driving slowly.

Mrs. Raven went on.

"The tall, huge figure seemed to have been seen at all hours after dusk. On the few occasions that the two other figures have been seen—for the people, since Worsfold, own to having seen them—it was always near midnight, long after the Court and all the respectable houses in the village were closed."

"The odd thing is, why anybody should instantly attach a thought of the supernatural to these figures," pondered Frank. "There must be something behind to account for this. For, though respectable houses may be shut for the night, young women, even from the same respectable houses, sometimes venture to take a ramble with a clandestine lover. I believe our own servants have sometimes done so."

Mrs. Raven shook her head deprecatingly at the absent servants.

"Leonard thought this very possible," she said. "The story ran, that the figures had

been seen, from a distance, at the back of the Court, also in Ash Lane, also at the corner of the moor. Leonard resolved to watch these places himself; and to have Budd and Mr. Fisher, of the White Hart, not far off—to seize upon the offenders, you understand, Frank."

"A very good idea," observed Frank, with approbation. "They are elderly enough to be trustworthy, and if armed with good staves they could be effective."

"So they went out the night before last," pursued his mother. "Leonard told me nothing about it beforehand," she added, with a wailing note in her voice.

"He only wanted to spare you trouble," said Frank.

"He went," she sighed, "and the others went with him. Their instructions were to keep out of sight, but to follow him up if they heard him give a call or a cry of any sort. They were to listen for a whistle. 'I expect to meet nothing worse than a pair of belated lovers,' said Leonard to them, 'and we need not let them know we have been watching.

So he went on in advance. Budd and Fisher saw him turn into Ash Lane, and they had not quite reached its corner, when they heard a shriek——"

She paused, with a catching in her breath, and then resumed:

"Budd says that he knew in a minute there was something altogether wrong, because it was not a halloa or a call—but a terrible cry. They both rushed forward. And there was your poor brother, lying on the ground quite insensible."

"That was the night before last, then," observed Frank. "Surely you did not telegraph to me so quickly as you might?"

"No," she said, faintly. "I waited, hoping that Leonard might recover consciousness."

"And he did not?" Frank asked.

She shook her head.

"He may lie so for days now, the doctors say. One can scarcely call it unconsciousness—it is that deep sleep of exhaustion, which they say often follows such seizures."

"What do they call it?—a fit of some kind?" Frank asked.

They were now in sight of the house.

"He had fits of an epileptic type when he was a child," she said; "as he grew stronger, they entirely ceased. But now it would seem that the evil has been only slumbering all the time."

"But what was it that brought it on?" Frank inquired, eagerly. "Have you found out whether Leonard saw anything? Did Budd and Fisher see anything?"

"They saw nothing," she replied. "Budd says he seemed to hear something else after the cry: but he was running himself then, and cannot say what it was. Leonard, of course, has been able to tell us nothing. The doctors say that the mere excitement of the occasion, wrought to its highest pitch as he neared the hut in Ash Lane, might suffice to produce this effect on a predisposed frame. The Standchester doctor says that no reliance must be placed on any statement Leonard may make after he recovers."

"Why is that?" asked Frank. "Surely one fit, though severe, can never weaken his faculties or impair his memory?"

"No," she answered, "but these attacks are often ushered in by spectral illusions. Dr. Wragge says that black dogs and old women in red cloaks are quite common; but that if the imagination had been excited by any particular image, probably that would be the image presented by the disease."

"I am glad you had—a lady with you in all this trouble," said Frank. But he could not rejoice that that lady was Evelyn Agate.

"Yes, it was well she was here," said Mrs. Raven absently; "but she is only a girl."

As Frank assisted his mother to alight, he reflected with thankfulness that at any rate Leonard had not been troubled about the strange appearance of his father's ring at Coltburn. He knew his brother's irritability and his sensitiveness to family repute, and he was inclined to think that the ruffling of

these emotions had prepared a sickly and predisposed frame to suddenly succumb to the enemy lurking latent within it.

Frank went straight to his brother's room. But there was no use in lingering there. The poor Squire lay wrapped in deadly slumber. Two trained nurses were in attendance, under the orders of the Standchester doctor, Dr. Wragge. One of them, Mary Bray, was well known in the neighbourhood; the other was a stranger, who it was presumed was special to this line of work, and at whom the servants looked with awe and deference, while Mary Bray watched her with jealous gaze.

The strange nurse was a little woman with a pale face and black eyes, and her every movement betokened thorough training and discipline. She wore a brown dress, so severely plain that it was clearly a uniform, and Dr. Wragge addressed her as "Nurse Hannah."

Frank persuaded Mrs. Raven to go to her chamber and lie down. She obeyed him in

an automatic kind of way. She was as one stunned. The sleep which had fallen upon Leonard's whole frame, almost seemed to have seized her mind. But there was nothing very strange in that. Nature always has her anodynes, and pain itself passes into a narcotic.

The young man went up to his own little room. How strange it looked! A change in ourselves makes a change of scene in the most familiar places. Frank carelessly opened his valise, and threw out his slippers, and then it occurred to him that he might as well write a note to his cousin Philip. It would be in time to catch the mid-day train, and could tell more than the telegram had told. He would urge Philip to write again to Coltburn, and spur the detectives on their work. If they should really see fit to prosecute their inquiries as to the "Oriental Mystery" as far as Ravenscourt, Frank began to think that many mysteries might be unearthed at once.

He only wrote a brief letter, and then he

thought he would post it himself. The silence in the house oppressed him, and he was glad of an excuse to taste a breath of fresh air, and get a sight of the old familiar trees.

Passing the gatekeeper's lodge, he met Mrs. Sims, the housekeeper, stepping out from its door. He stopped and spoke to her. She was solemn and portentous.

"I said to Budd, that night, sir," she said, "there'd be no good come of being too curious. Mysteries is mysteries, and it's best not meddling with things whose locks and springs you know nought about. It was natural in the master, sir; aye, and good of him, for poor folk about were getting awful scared. But then, as it is now, matters is worse."

"Not if people could look at my poor brother's accident sensibly, as the doctors tell them," said Frank. "And have you heard of the man Sloam during the last day or two? Surely everybody is willing to believe that his fright or injury was caused by his

own fault? Eldred Sloam going home at midnight, means that Eldred Sloam was going home not sober."

Mrs. Sims shook her head.

"The boy James," she said, "says his father was very bad. His head seemed affected. I believe it was something he'd said to Worsfold that frightened Worsfold, before he took to the new fancies about two of them together. Charity Hale's got somebody from somewhere to look after Eldred now. James says she seems to be a distant relation of his mother's, but he thinks she doesn't want to own the connection."

"Indeed," said Frank, not much interested.

"But I'm thinking of the master," said Mrs. Sims dolefully. "They carried him into Eldred's house when he was took, and this person did her best for him, and did it right well, Dr. Wragge says. It was strange it should be to Eldred's house the master should be taken," she added, shaking her head. For though Mrs. Sims professed to

be above the weaknesses of her fellows, she had not forgotten the fortune-teller's hints about the root of the Raven tree lying under Eldred Sloam's hearthstone.

"Do you know whether Mrs. Raven has sent to thank her?" asked Frank.

"I expect, sir, she hasn't given it a thought yet, poor lady."

"At any rate, I will walk down there at once, and thank her in the name of the family."

He went to Sloam's house through the village, passing some familiar faces as he went. A strong wind in the night had swept down many leaves, and autumn was clearly changing into winter. On Sloam's low cottage wall, the Virginian creeper had shed its last ruddy beauty, and the doors and windows of the house were all shut.

Frank fancied that he saw somebody move within as he passed the long, low-eaved casement, and so he expected his light tap to be promptly answered. But in this he was disappointed. He knocked again and again,

louder each time, yet fruitlessly, and at last stepped back and peeped through the window. He could see half of the interior, but not the two far corners, in one of which Eldred's bed stood. Going back to the door, he gently raised the latch.

Eldred was on his bed, apparently deep in heavy slumber. No other living creature was to be seen. The room was quite clean and neat, presenting a very changed appearance since the evening when Charity and Evelyn had visited it and met the Vicar there. Probably the woman in charge had taken advantage of Eldred's deep slumber to go down into the village, and do a little marketing. Frank felt that he must have been mistaken in thinking somebody moved when he first passed the windows. He must have been deceived by a flicker of light and shade on sundry garments hanging on nails outside a closet door.

He had all an English gentleman's feelings about intrusion—especially upon humble folk. And he certainly would not have dreamed of

penetrating farther into the cottage. Except one is playing at hide-and-seek, one does not look for people in dark cupboards. If Frank had done so, he might have found reason to ask why a sane, middle-aged woman need hide herself in one, because a gentleman of the Court had come to call on her.

Frank thought he would go home the other way, and survey the haunted paths. They looked peaceful enough in the clear cold light. There was a little clump of tall trees at the corner where Ash Lane broke off from the Common, and there was nothing but hedgerows and a few thin saplings all down the lane to the old carthouse. There were no gnarled stumps to cast weird shadows on a moonlight night, or to loom into undue prominence on a misty one. Even the hedgerow was rather lower than is common, and thin and straggling into the bargain, for the land thereabouts was poor.

Presently Frank stood in front of the ruined carthouse and looked round.

He thought he could make out where his brother had fallen. It was on his right hand as he stood there—at that side of the cart-house nearest to Ravenscourt. The earth was heavily trampled, and some tall weeds lay broken and dead.

He turned and looked in the other direction. How very poor the hedge was! Why, it almost seemed as if there had once been an opening in it. Frank moved towards it with vivid curiosity. There had certainly been an opening, and the boughs were still hanging as if they had been rudely and recently brushed aside. The whole yielded easily to a sudden pressure, as Frank himself passed through, and then it closed again behind him much as before.

He stood on the other side, and looked back towards the lane. If his brother had really seen anything, then this was the way by which it had disappeared from the sight of Budd and Fisher. And Frank's heart gave a leap. There was something sticking in the hedge—a small white something. It might be a clue, however faint.

Why did his breath come hard and his cheek turn pale, as he disentangled it and held it in his hand. It was but a torn scrap of coarse muslin, starred with a quaint flower-pattern—an article which might be bought at any country shop, anywhere.

But Frank had seen a piece of similar stuff before, and that was in Alice Cleare's work-basket.

CHAPTER VI.

AN AGENT ABOUT THE COURT.

FRANK went home like one in a dream: and yet with a clear purpose. He must write to Alice Cleare at once, and ask her where she had got that muslin, and whether she knew of anybody else who had some like it. And when he sat down and promptly wrote the letter, that was all he said, except that he sent messages of kind remembrance to all the Connell family. Frank got this letter off by the same post which took his epistle to Philip.

The hours passed drearily. Frank sat with his mother and Evelyn Agate at meals, but

Mrs. Raven was in a state of nervous exhaustion which caused her to shrink almost at a word or a look, and made her son feel that the most dutiful kindness he could show was to leave her in quietness. The younger lady seemed gloomy and absorbed, never originated a remark, and only answered shortly when addressed.

The doctors came and went. There was no perceptible change in the patient, either for better or worse; and the only cause for satisfaction was that everything which wealth, skill and money could do, was certainly being done. Dr. Wragge was quite enthusiastic in his delight at having secured the services of so valuable a person as "Nurse Hannah."

"And it happened providentially, as one may say," he told Frank. "I was sent for to your poor brother at about two o'clock in the morning, and as soon as I got to the Court, I sent back for my regular nurse, Bray, a good woman, thorough-trained, and not to be surpassed in a general way; but if

her experience is less on one point than on another, it is on the very matter we have in hand just now."

"You don't have many cases of this sort among our healthy peasantry, I dare say," said Frank.

"No, no; still I can't say I felt anxious, for good common sense, goodwill, and good discipline go far of themselves in nursing. But just as I'm sitting down to my breakfast, in walks Nurse Hannah, to see me. I hadn't seen her of late years, but I'd heard of her from time to time, among my professional brethren, as having given up her hospital work and taken to private nursing, especially in mental cases. And now here she came in, saying she was taking a little change of air from her labours in London, and that, finding herself in my neighbourhood, she had remembered our old acquaintance, and had thought that if I had any nice comfortable duty to give her, she was quite fit to undertake it. An angel from heaven couldn't have been more welcome, my dear Mr. Frank.

Yes, Nurse Hannah," he added, as she entered the room, to ask for further instructions in some matter of drugs or diet, "I'm talking about you, and your arrival in the very nick of time."

The little woman looked up at Frank Raven. She had the watching eyes of her calling. There was just a momentary quiver of the muscles about her mouth—a little smile with a spice of mockery in it. The Reverend Jasper Toynbee, who had just come in to inquire after the Squire, noticed it, and remarked as she went away:

"Uniforms may disguise human nature, but they don't change it. Half of a nun's saintliness is often in her coif. I fancy we set our faces to match our clothes, doctor. If that little woman hadn't been a trained nurse, she would have laughed outright just now, and I fear it would have been at you. You comparing her with an angel tickled her tremendously!"

"Well, well," said the doctor, good-natured, "everybody is all the better for a

laugh. It is the cheapest and safest medicine going, and even if people take it at our expense, it leaves us none the poorer."

"I'm afraid your poor brother never allowed himself enough laughter," said the reverend gentleman to Frank, as the doctor went out. "This is all very sad, my boy."

"Yes, indeed," answered Frank, "but I think Dr. Wragge seems more hopeful to-day."

The clergyman shook his head dubiously. Dr. Wragge was an old friend of his, and he had spoken plainly to him. There might be an apparently satisfactory rallying, but the real end would inevitably be speedy death, or else the long, lingering death-in-life of imbecility. The old gentleman looked a little wistfully at the gallant young man before him, who might so soon be the last of this fated Raven race.

"Had you noticed any change whatever in Leonard before this attack?" Frank asked.

"There was no difference at all in

Leonard," said Mr. Toynbee. "None that I could see. In fact, I thought him rather better than usual; perhaps that was a bad sign! Of course, I've seen him almost every day, but the last conversation I had with him was when I dined here while you were all away. He was quite facetious—for him. He almost offended me."

And Mr. Toynbee suddenly looked grave. But it was not at the remembrance of Leonard's puerile jests at an old bachelor's inquisitive questions concerning the new young lady-companion, Evelyn Agate. It was at the recollection of that problem in which those questions had really originated, which had haunted him since he first saw Evelyn, and of that most unexpected solution which he believed he had received on the night when he met her and Charity Hale in Eldred Sloam's cottage. Mr. Toynbee would never lightly ask another question concerning Evelyn Agate's antecedents.

"It has been most unfortunate that your brother's attack should come on at such a

time, Frank, and under such circumstances. You cannot imagine in what a state the neighbourhood has been thrown. It was at fever-heat after Sloam's accident. The Squire's misfortune has broken down all reserve on the subject."

Frank looked up at the Vicar. It was hard not to tell him his whole story.

"What is your explanation of the matter, sir?" asked the young man, after a pause.

"You are not asking me whether or not I believe in the ghosts, are you?" said Mr. Toynbee, with a little dry laugh.

"But, don't you think my brother must have seen something?"

The Vicar glanced at him.

"There is the doctor's explanation of excitement, bringing on the latent disease. Your brother had similar fits in infancy; we must rest content with that if we can get at nothing better."

"I could rest content with it, so far as regards himself. I cannot with the theory that it is only imagination which has been at

work in all the other cases," answered Frank. "May it not suit some ill-designing person or persons to dress up and play the farce for a purpose?"

"I thought of that, too," answered the Vicar. "But, then, who could it be? The only person at all likely to indulge in nefarious tricks, or to tempt others to such a trick, is Eldred Sloam himself: and it could not have been he whom your brother saw, for he had been leg-fast to his bed since days before. Unless, indeed, he was shamming very skilfully."

"You see there is little unnatural or portentous in the alleged appearances themselves," laughed Frank: "no horns or hoofs, or phosphoric lights." And he told the story of Alice Cleare's walk from Gerstowe, and his accidental meeting with her on that occasion after leaving the Vicar's own dining-table, and of the figure which had scared her.

Mr. Toynbee listened attentively. Frank continued.

"What I want to know is, at what point did the notion creep in that this mysterious

figure is anything else than an ordinary prowler. I want to know at what point this figure got the reputation of being the persistent wraith of my great-uncle, vowing vengeance on the Court."

"I don't know of any stranger in the village," pondered Mr. Toynbee. "The few lodgers are all decent people with settled situations. We have had our usual summer and autumn visitation from artists—the same old faces, and the very same white umbrellas and camp-stools. We have not had a gipsy for months. Nor any excursions from Standchester. Your brother discouraged them coming to the Court grounds because of your father's recent death."

He paused as he said that. He might have added that Leonard had also observed they trampled down the grass, and made the villagers discontented. If Leonard had been well, and likely for long life, the Vicar might have roguishly narrated this characteristic trait.

"The only stranger I can recollect who

made any impression on me," the Vicar went on presently, "was a young man whom I saw one day this autumn—yes, I remember it was the very day your mother returned from Coltburn. I can recollect that, because I was on my way to Sloam's cottage, and it was the coming in of Miss Evelyn and Mrs. Hale while I was there that first let me know Mrs. Raven had come back so unexpectedly."

"And this young man——" said Frank anxiously, keeping the old gentleman to his main discourse.

"This young man was sitting on the suicide's grave in our churchyard," pursued Mr. Toynbee. "I think it was that which made me notice him at all. No Ravenstoke man would do that, you know. And I own it gave me a shiver to see him there. He was very dark, thin, and pale, and he started up when he heard my footstep on the grass. I wondered at the time whether some law of affinity might not have drawn him to that grave. Ah, you see, I have my own superstitions, young man."

"And you never saw him again?" asked Frank, rather dreamily. For he could not see any reason for imagining a connection between a wandering pedestrian and a perpetual ghost. And, meantime, he heard footsteps going softly to and fro in the room overhead. It was his bedroom, and it occurred to him that he had left his writing-case open.

"No, I never saw him again," said the Vicar. "Of course there must have been plenty of other strangers here in a casual way. It was only his sitting on that grave which made me remember him, for I'm afraid my memory for faces, and even for facts, is beginning to fade. Here have I been talking to you all this time, and quite forgotten the very thing I particularly wanted to say—something your brother told me that day when I dined with him."

The Vicar lowered his voice, as people do when they are about to make an important communication. Frank leaned forward, interested.

"I did not think much of it at the time,"

said the Vicar, with a provoking delay in coming to the point. "I thought there was probably some mistake in the matter."

"What was it?" asked Frank eagerly.

"But now it becomes equally important whether it was a fancy or a fact," pursued the Vicar deliberately; "because, in the one case, it may prove an insidious on-coming of mental confusion and trepidation in his mind, suddenly bursting out at last; and, in the other it goes towards the theory of the secret presence in this house of untrustworthy, designing people. Leonard spoke to me about your father's ring—the red intaglio."

"And what about it?" asked Frank breathlessly. If the Vicar had been watching him, he might have noticed that the young man put his fingers into his waistcoat-pocket and touched something there. It was the ring. He had not worn it on his finger since his return to Ravenscourt, but had fastened it to his watch-chain, out of sight.

"Leonard thought he had lost it," said the Vicar. "He felt quite sure he had put it

away in a certain drawer in his bureau, and when he chanced to look there, it was gone, so he declared: he was terribly vexed about it. I expect it is really there, all right," Mr. Toynbee added. "And that mistake need not argue much mental muddle either. More than once, I have lost things, and found them, months after, in their proper place."

Amid all his perturbation, Frank could hardly help smiling at the good man's simple self-satisfaction, while all the while his own absent-mindedness, and the faithful but domineering "management" of his old housekeeper, were by-words in the village.

"I know where the ring is," said Frank, slowly and rather guardedly. "My brother was right: it was removed from its proper place, and it was recovered in a very unaccountable way. I have it now, quite safely."

The Vicar looked at Frank with a shade of friendly suspicion. Did Frank think he had a right to that ring as a personal remembrance of his father, and so had possessed

himself of it? But the Vicar would have as soon expected the church tower to fall, as to find his old patron's younger son guilty of the least wilful evasion or misleading. No; that could not be!

Their eyes met. The candid young face flushed with the mere consciousness of a secret.

"There is some sort of conspiracy going on about the Court," said Frank. "The removal of that ring was one sign of it. And there have been others. In simple fact, sir, sundry matters have come to my knowledge which have compelled me to apply for help to a detective. I would tell you all about it, only until something is discovered, a slur of suspicion, probably quite groundless, seems to rest on every name that has to be drawn into the matter."

Mr. Toynbee sat silent and thoughtful. He knew that he, too, had his little secret—the solution of his problem about Evelyn's face—which he kept to himself for equally unselfish reasons.

"It is a terrible world," thought the rector to himself; "and one of its laws seems to be that the innocent must suffer for the guilty, but while we can help it we ourselves need not be their executioners."

"May I ask one thing," said he, with that fine courtliness which would not for one moment take advantage of his position to intrude into Frank's confidence. "May I ask if it is any dishonesty that you fear?"

Frank hesitated a moment. He was quite at ease now that he had admitted the existence of a secret.

"No," he said; "at least, not exactly. Only as dishonesty is part of every wrong thing. It is something that concerns family matters—that may concern me more than anybody else."

The old clergyman looked at him wistfully.

"It seems only the other day that I christened you. I hope you are well-advised in all you are doing, Frank. You young folks frighten us elders sometimes. You are so rash."

"My uncle Connell knows all about the matter," said Frank simply. "I was in his house when it first began. I told him everything—almost more than I should tell, I think. But he is kind and sensible."

"A good man," commented the Vicar cordially. "I have read some of his writings and heard of many of his actions."

"Mr. Connell reminded me that when I was at home here, I should have a friend at hand in you," said Frank. "If anything occurs in which I need advice, I shall come to you at once, sir."

"Ask any advice you will—and tell me no more than is necessary to enable me to give advice worth having," answered the Vicar. "And I will keep my own eyes and ears open, too."

As soon as Mr. Toynbee was gone, Frank ran upstairs to his own room. He had forgotten the footsteps he had heard; and there was nothing in the room to remind him that anybody had been there during his absence. But the breeze had risen, and, finding entrance

at the open window, had played some havoc among the loose sheets on his writing-case. With the draught caused by the opening door as he went in, another paper whirled up and fell to the floor.

Frank hastily gathered them together. They were only blank sheets. He opened the inside of the case to thrust them into one of its pockets.

The pocket was empty. He knew it had not held much: only two or three sheets of foreign paper. With a petulant exclamation of impatience, he recognised that he had opened the wrong pocket, and turned to the other.

But, then—he paused—neither pocket ought to be empty. For in that where he had not stored stationery, he had put away the mysterious paper which he had found with the gold in the flower-pot at Coltburn.

He turned again to the first pocket. It was certainly empty. Yet he was quite sure he had put the paper in his writing-case, that he had seen it there that morning; and so,

without a pause, he turned out the contents of the second pocket.

There was the missing paper, safe enough, neatly folded between the sheets of thin foreign note.

"This is an illustration of the Vicar's remarks," mused Frank. "If I could have sworn to anything, it would have been that I put that written paper in the empty side. I wonder how many mistakes we make which we never find out at all? And now, I suppose, with that paper in it, I ought not to leave the case unfastened. Yet I suspect my father's ring escaped somehow from under lock and key."

However, he secured the case and was on his way to Leonard's sick-room, when he met a servant bringing him a letter. It had come in by the late post, and was from Philip. The first envelope contained no letter—only an enclosure of another envelope superscribed in a strange hand, and marked—"Or please forward." Philip had scribbled on the other side :

"This came by first post: fancy it has been delayed. I obey its request, especially as I fancy it is from our silent friend at Coltburn."

Frank eagerly opened the enclosed packet. Philip was right in his conjecture. It was from the detective. But the detective's communication was almost as curt as Philip's own.

"RESPECTED SIR,

"Mr. Jones has placed your latest communication with me." (That was the anonymous letter to Alice Cleare.) "He tells me how anxious you are. But a good hunt may be spoiled by jumping out before the time. I have an agent about the Court. I am doing my best.

"Yours obediently,

"HENRY CRAN."

"An agent about the Court!" That was, Frank knew, within his own instructions, or at any rate, within his own permission. Had

he not just said so himself to the Vicar? And yet now, as he stood among the old familiar surroundings, he shrank from the idea. But his strong common sense came to the rescue. It had to be.

A little natural curiosity arose as to who this agent was, and in what function he appeared. Or might it be a woman? But there were certainly only two strange women on the Court horizon just now—one in the house—to wit, the nurse, Hannah—and one probably hearing all that went on in it, from the footboy going daily to and fro to his sick father—the taciturn stranger, who had come to take care of Eldred Sloam.

The nurse was an old acquaintance of good Dr. Wragge. She was not likely to be a detective. It must be this strange woman whom Frank had so innocently and unsuccessfully tried to see. Frank passed the rest of the evening with his mother, sitting quietly by the unconscious Leonard. Evelyn Agate went softly to and fro. With

her own hands she brought up tea for them. And when, near midnight, they came down to the dining-room to snatch a little supper, they found the men-servants banished from the scene, and Evelyn herself in actual attendance on the wants of Mrs. Raven. Frank could not but assist her: Mrs. Raven was their mutual care; and when she bade them a sad good-night, she kissed them both, first one and then the other, and grasped a hand of each in each of hers.

Evelyn had certainly given a very perfect representation of sympathy. Frank wondered why he did not like her. Perhaps he might have understood it if he had known that directly she was behind the scenes—*i.e.*, within her own bedroom—she had executed a little private waltz, and then sat down before the glass, and smiled at her own reflection for half an hour.

CHAPTER VII.

NURSE HANNAH'S TRUNK.

ALICE CLEARE'S answer to Frank came from Coltburn as soon as the post could bring it. She could not help indulging in a little feminine curiosity as to why his question was asked. The information she could give was meagre enough. She had torn the lining of her dress during her walk to Gerstowe, on the day of her brother's death, and had gone into a little shop there and bought this material, and asked permission to sit down and repair the damage. The remnant of her purchase she still had, in the work-basket where Frank had seen it.

It is singular how slow the facts of life are, compared with human fancies and expectations. In our own histories we look forward to events, oblivious of the weeks and months, and sometimes years, when nothing seems to happen and life goes on growing, as it were, underground, till the moment when it suddenly bursts into new form.

In looking forward, Frank seemed to foresee that his brother would recover consciousness and tell what he had seen, that the family would take counsel together, and that a definite line of conduct would be pointed out to them by the revelations which events would make, and by which Frank himself was determined to take his stand. Unless there was a full explanation of much that puzzled him, an entire assurance on the part of those who knew best that he was really the son of the late Squire and his wife, Frank was determined not to touch any Raven gold—above all, never to allow himself to stand in the position of Leonard's

heir. For if he were not that lawful child, then, Where and who was the lawful child? Whenever he thought on that point, the name of Evelyn Agate answered his silent query. The coincidence of their birthdays, her mysterious origin, the course of conduct pointed out by the fortune-teller as his duty, and for his advantage; the message sent him with the gold, that message which at any time he could take from his writing-case and peruse—all these facts turned in this direction.

Yet there were arguments on the other side. If Evelyn were really a child taken from Ravenscourt, then who was he? It seemed but natural to infer that he was the lost son of the house to which Evelyn was taken. But if he was an Agate, how could he possibly have the Raven face, as had been so often testified?

It must be owned that when Frank contemplated a possibility which might take his name and his rank from him, it was always easier to do so if he fancied that at the same time he should find himself Gertrude

Agate's nephew, with home-rights in that quaint domicile; which, despite its old tragedy and its living skeleton, seemed to him the brightest home in the world. But what had not entered into Frank's mind to conceive, was the length of time for which he would be left to indulge in all these speculations, without coming any nearer to their settlement.

Leonard's partial recovery was of the very slowest. Consciousness came back after a few days: he slept, took nourishment, spoke a few words, making clear that he knew where he was and by whom surrounded, and then he relapsed into slumber.

There seemed no doubt that the brain had somewhat given way. Very gently, but very persistently, did the medical men warn mother and brother not to build hopes that the head of the family would ever be restored to them in any complete and joyful sense.

"The mystery of that last hour is so dreadful," said Mrs. Raven, one day, sitting before the doctor with clasped hands.

"You must not think of it in that light," answered Dr. Wragge kindly. "I do not believe there was any horror at all, except your son's own fit; and remember, if the very slight excitement he had undergone sufficed to bring it on then, something else would surely have done so on some other and speedy occasion."

"Do you think that a tendency to delusions runs in families?" she asked, with strange abruptness.

The doctor stole a sidelong glance at Frank, as he answered:

"There is always that probability. But there are so many elements at work in all these cases, that it is impossible to foresee their particular issue. Nobody in the world can be more unlike than some members of the same families. That is because they chance to derive their constitution and temperament—their very nature, as it were, from different sides of the house. For instance, madam, your own two sons are singularly unlike."

Frank's heart gave a great thump. He looked at his mother.

"Frank is not much like me, indeed," she said. "And Leonard is my very image. Then, Dr. Wragge," she added, "you infer that Leonard must have derived his infliction from me?"

"A delicate constitution manifests itself in divers ways in individuals," answered the doctor diplomatically. "Have you ever heard of any distant relative who was afflicted in this manner?"

"No," she said, with a slight hesitancy. "Would it be possible to be subject to a visual delusion without knowing it?—to see something again and again, and go on believing it to be a reality?"

"In that case, you see, one would get disabused by the conduct of other people," answered the doctor. "The patient would then discover and acknowledge his morbid condition: or if he persisted in regarding it as normal, he must be considered a victim of mania, which might stop at that point, or

might spread into general mental unsoundness."

At that moment the nurse came in, and summoned Frank away by a message from the sick-room.

"I saw something three times," said the lady, speaking to the doctor slowly, as if weighing the significance of every word she uttered. "I saw something three times, which I believed each time to be real. I believed I knew what it was, and what it was doing. Other people saw that something, too, but they could not understand any significance in it, and were only mystified. I heard so many explanations offered of what they had seen, that I scarcely knew what to think."

"Did you tell your part of the story?" asked the doctor, interested.

"No," she said, with the ghost of a smile. "I kept that to myself."

"That reticence inclines me to think you were not mistaken."

"But don't you think that some great

anxiety or terror might make such reticence possible even to a diseased mind?" asked Mrs. Raven.

The doctor was non-plussed. He had thought he should certainly please the lady by pronouncing in favour of her intellectual soundness. But now he felt that somehow she would have been better pleased if he had doubted it. What was one to do with such a woman?

"Well," said Mrs. Raven, with that strange smile still lingering on her face, "I feel quite certain that Leonard has inherited this terrible disease through me. You won't forget what I have told you, doctor?"

"Oh no," answered Dr. Wragge, and thought within himself, that if Mrs. Raven wanted to commit a crime, and to set up a plea of not guilty on the ground of insanity, she could not have laid her plan better.

And then the weary days wore on. The time came when Leonard, of his own accord, recalled and spoke of the events immediately preceding his accident.

His story was, that he had certainly seen a man and a woman coming along Ash Lane to meet him. He entirely refused to admit that he had been particularly excited or alarmed. He had had time to notice the white cap and the green gown which village rumour had always attributed to the female's appearance. Then he had felt a sudden strange sensation, and had heard a cry, which he could scarcely believe had been his own utterance. He remembered no more.

This entirely agreed with the doctor's conviction as to the history of his malady. But at first, Leonard refused to believe the doctor's explanation, that the two people in the lane were nothing but the phantasmagoria of his own brain, creating, in the on-coming of disease, those images towards which his expectation had been directed. Not that Leonard thought they were ghosts—oh no, the man was sure to be some disreputable stranger: the woman, not unlikely, one of their own servants, giving ear to his blandishments.

On this suggestion Frank interviewed Mrs.

Sims, who again indignantly repelled it. Every female servant about the Court had been indoors on that evening.

"Miss Agate can tell you they were all sitting together at needlework," insisted Mrs. Sims. "I'm not making any mistake about the date, for she was locked in her room quite early in the evening, and Fanny went knocking at her door, asking questions, knowing what a pretty taste she had in cutting out. Miss Agate made answer she was lying down with a bad headache, but would come down directly she could. And so she did, and showed the girls what to do; and I am positively sure not one of the girls went out after that."

But, presently, Leonard began to yield to the doctor's representations concerning the on-coming of his illness, and then a new danger presented itself. He began to dread the return of the phantasm as a phantasm, for would it not mean another stretch of helpless misery, another step taken downward on the path of disease and death? The

doctors scarcely knew what to do. They could not deny his reasoning, yet his fear was the surest means of compassing what he feared.

One painful form this fear took, was a constant secret doubt of his own perceptions. Did a stranger unexpectedly appear on the lawn, he would ask nervously:

"Don't I see a man in black, or a woman in a shawl?" as the case might be.

And Frank would answer, quietly, "Yes," and add some little detail of the stranger's personal appearance to reassure Leonard in his own eyes. But he and Mrs. Raven knew what all this meant.

Autumn was fairly gone, and winter had come, and the slow weeks had brought none of those vivid changes towards which imagination looks. Leonard came down from his bedroom, and lay on couches in the public apartments, and grew vexed and irritable over matters he could no longer control, and tried his watchers' patience and tact, as invalids in this stage always do. They would

scarcely have known how to bear their burden, but for the ready wit and skill of Nurse Hannah, still retained, though the local nurse, Mrs. Bray, had departed for other cases. Frank felt that he had been quite right in his quick decision that this little quiet woman, who seemed so passion ately absorbed in her profession, was not the agent of the detective, wherever that agent might be.

There seemed little ground for the popular belief that the woman who had kept Eldred Sloam's cottage, and who was still said to occasionally visit his tumble-down home, was a relation of Eldred Sloam's first wife. The boy James himself did not claim the relationship, though he had never contradicted the report, and indeed in part believed it. He could only say that his father had evidently known her before, and as the lad put it, "respected" her, a filial phrase which Frank translated into "feared" her. Jem himself clearly shared the feeling. And though, during her stay, all the lad's decent instincts of order,

cleanliness and good hours had been fully gratified, yet he seemed glad when she was gone.

Eldred himself was moving about again, though he was not yet fit for work. His clothes had all been neatly mended and a considerable addition made to their stock, and he did not frequent the Pitchfork as of old, and was more guarded in his conduct altogether. People called him "a changed man"—a kindly judgment from which shrewd Mrs. Sims begged to differ.

And so Christmas-tide drew nigh. All the brightness that was in the house came from without, in cheery letters from the Coltburn Connells—though they were not without their troubles, too, for Louisa continued very unwell, and was advised to seek change of air.

Gertrude Agate wrote constantly to Evelyn, and somehow, little by little, her letters grew to be regarded as public property. When they came in, Mrs. Raven always asked the news, and Evelyn was nothing loth to tell

what there was, and to add tit-bits of her adopted aunt's wisdom and humour. For these always interested Frank, and drew her and the young man towards each other as nothing else did. Philip's letters, again, full of wit and sparkle, told Frank what Gertrude's never alluded to, that the anonymous letters had entirely ceased, and that peace had returned to Miss Agate's little household, albeit her unhappy brother was at times strangely restless. Frank privately wondered that he received no further sign from the detectives, but nothing came.

It was Christmas Eve. There were, indeed, few signs of festivity about the Court—in short, none except some holly and mistletoe stuck upon the picture-frames, and a slight increase in the arrival of letters, due to the appearance of Christmas cards. Evelyn had gone about the house all day in an abstracted and nervous manner. She said that she felt one of her headaches coming on, but she would keep going about as long as she could. Mrs. Raven urged her to go to her room and

lie down, but she put off the lady's solicitude, lightly though gratefully, and kept her place in the family circle.

They prepared to spend the evening, as usual, in the drawing-room. It was a still night, without the least wind, though cold enough for a light fall of snow. Such was Frank's report of the weather, as he drew aside the curtains and looked out, before taking his seat by his mother near the fire.

Leonard's couch, with his invalid writing-table beside it, was drawn up close to the hearth, and Evelyn took her usual station on a low chair at his right hand, where she could easily supply his many small, fidgety wants. This couch and chair faced the window, while Mrs. Raven and Frank were seated with their backs toward it.

Sometimes, at these evening hours, one of the little group read aloud. It was not very easy to find books suitable for the circumstances: Leonard had no love for those sunny paths of literature where minds which need rest and refreshment may wander with de-

light and benefit. So they fell back chiefly on travels.

A book of travels lay open this Christmas Eve, but in the meantime they were all engaged in looking through the illustrated literature of the season. Leonard had wanted to do this, and his slightest wish was everybody's law now, especially as he had shown much nervous irritation during the last week, consequent on the doctor's refusing to permit him to go through the estate accounts for the close of the year, and to see his tenants as usual.

Mrs. Raven and Frank were bending over the same sheet, trying to read some picture riddles. Evelyn was idly gazing at a large brilliant chromo, and Leonard lay back exhausted with the exertion of turning over big pages, and giving forth adverse criticisms. Suddenly, he sprang up with an awful cry!

The others were on their feet in a twinkling, and rushed toward him.

He tried to put them away—struggling

fiercely for utterance, which, after that one shriek, seemed denied him. His right arm was extended to its full length, the forefinger pointing at the window—while, with his left, he grasped his mother's shoulder with a grip which she felt for hours afterwards. She knew at once that the terrible fit was on him again in its very worst form. Then a cloud gathered swiftly in his eyes, and had not all their arms been about him, he would have fallen heavily to the ground: and they knew that the curative work of months was undone.

Nurse Hannah and the servants came on the scene.

"He seemed to see something again," moaned Mrs. Raven. "He pointed, so! See! the curtains are not closely drawn."

They bore him away to his chamber. Evelyn went with Mrs. Raven to its door.

"I cannot go in," said the girl, with a strong shiver; "this shock has defeated my struggle to keep up."

Certainly her face was deathly pale, and the hand she laid on Mrs. Raven's trembled terribly.

"Poor dear," said the lady wearily, "you must not be ill, too." She was wondering within herself why she herself did not break down. Some people seem so hard to kill! She did not even remember then that the suffering which is slowest in manifestation is often surest in result.

"Let the young lady go away and take care of herself," said the nurse, in a quiet, kind tone. "She cannot help us here. Indeed, there will be little for any of us to do to-night."

So Evelyn went away. And the nurse busied herself in composing the unconscious sufferer in his couch, Sims and Janet Mackay assisting her. When all was as calm and bright as possible, she called the mother and brother into the room.

"He is not likely to waken for hours," she whispered; "but if he does it will be only for a moment, and it might be better that he

should see you than me. I will go and see after one or two little matters that ought to be in readiness, and I may take a turn on the terrace to make me fresh and wakeful for the night. A call will summon me in a moment."

She glided away. But she went first in the direction of Evelyn's room, and laid her hand very softly on the door-handle. The door was fastened. She rapped—once—twice—thrice—each knock louder than the last. Then she knocked once more, sharply, listened a moment, and turned away with a peculiar smile on her calm countenance.

She went downstairs, into the hall, took down a dark grey cloak that hung there, and wrapping it closely about her, gently opened the outer doors and stepped upon the terrace. She walked a few paces from the house, turned round and looked up at it. She knew which was the window of Evelyn's room. Its blind was drawn, but a light burning within was clearly visible.

She returned to the terrace-walk. She

did not pace to and fro, but stood quite still in the darkness, at that corner which commanded the front of the building, and its side nearest to the grass path running towards Ash Lane and Sloam's cottage. What was she awaiting ?

She heard light steps presently, and could see something moving — something which looked whitish in such dim light as a few misty stars afforded. As it came towards her, Nurse Hannah stole closer and closer to the side of the house—and nearer and nearer to the chief windows and the portico.

The light, scudding steps that she heard ceased for a moment—the whitish something, which was a garment, was taken off and folded into a small compass ; and then there came gliding along the terrace towards her, carrying the folded packet in its hand, a slight, graceful, dark-robed figure. Nurse Hannah stepped forward.

There was an exclamation of surprise, a start backwards.

"What, nurse! Are you too taking an airing like me!"

"There is nothing like it for those who know when it's needed, Miss Agate," returned Nurse Hannah, walking beside the young lady towards the hall-door. "But I think I've had enough of it now. And I'm afraid it hasn't done you much good," she added, as she saw the intense pallor of Evelyn's face and the feverish redness of her lips.

"I almost think I should be the better for another turn or two," said the girl, running back. But she only went a few yards and turned again.

"Oh, I'm sure you wouldn't," said the nurse. "And you've been out with too few wraps—no wonder you're chilled." She was in her black silk evening dress, whose train was tucked up about her, not carried in her hands, though they were both now free. "Go right up to your room and get to bed. Just look in at Mr. Leonard's chamber on your way, will you, please, and tell Mrs.

Raven that I've come back into the house, and will be with her the moment I've had a bit of supper. Poor lady, I dare say she's nervous."

Nurse Hannah lingered, unfastening her cloak, till Evelyn had disappeared upstairs: then, with a speed strangely contrasted with her usual quiet and deliberate movements, she again went outside, ran rapidly to the spot to which Evelyn had run, and there moved oddly from side to side of the path in the gloom, as if she was feeling for something with her feet.

Whatever she expected to find, she apparently found it. She caught it up, and wrapped it in her cloak, which she was now carrying, not on her shoulders, but over her arm. She hastily made the cloak into a careless-looking bundle, returned to the house, went straight to the housekeeper's room, dropped her bundle into the depths of a great old-fashioned easy-chair which stood there, sat down on guard in front of it, and requested that some refreshment

might be brought to her as speedily as possible.

She had scarcely begun to eat the meal hastily set before her, when Evelyn looked into the room, to ask Mrs. Sims some casual question. The young lady took no notice of Nurse Hannah, till that worthy woman again warned her that she looked poorly, and that she would be better in her warm bed, when she answered, coldly, that she would go there in a few minutes' time.

Nurse Hannah snatched a very hasty meal. In fact, she scarcely touched the food prepared.

"Does Miss Evelyn have a hot bottle in her bed generally?" she asked, absently.

"No," said Mrs. Sims, "I don't encourage young ladies in such ways unless they ask me. A deal of the habits folks get into depends on what servants train 'em in."

"Let me take one up for her to-night, then," said Nurse Hannah. "She will really be the better for it now. She looks thoroughly chilled."

She carried it upstairs in one hand, and her rolled-up cloak in the other. She took the cloak to her own room, and bundled it and its invisible contents into her own big box; then she carefully locked that box, and brought away its key in her pocket. Then she went on to Evelyn's room; again she knocked, and again there was no answer. Then she tried the door. It was unfastened now, and she went in. The room was empty.

She put the bottle in the bed and lingered over it, smoothing the sheets and patting the pillows. So, therefore, she seemed quite naturally employed, and in no sense watching or waiting, when presently Evelyn arrived, a little breathless.

Nurse Hannah told her, cheerfully, what she had done for her comfort, hoped she would be better in the morning, and bade her good-night.

But before Nurse Hannah went to take up her watch by Leonard Raven's bed, she paid

another visit to her own chamber, and took a very leisurely survey of the recent addition to the contents of her trunk. It was only a light green dressing-gown !

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STRANGER IN CHURCH.

THERE is this striking difference between trouble which has hope and trouble which has despair: ıe former makes a pause in life, the usual ɔurse of things may stop, just because it ay be presently resumed; but when once espair enters, we make a forlorn-hope ruggle to keep things going, feeling that hat we once let drop may well be dropped ɔr ever.

After Leonard's first attack, the Court ıousehold had been irregular at meals, irregular at public worship. Indeed, Mrs. Raven had not appeared at church for many Sundays,

and Evelyn, too, had kept her company at home for two or three of them.

But this second attack of the Squire's changed what they had striven to believe but an isolated catastrophe into merely the first link of a chain which might drag its weary length down many years. Life must take up its burden and go on.

Though neither Frank nor Mrs. Raven had retired to rest until far past midnight, they both presented themselves at the breakfast-table on Christmas morning, and when Evelyn came down, Frank suggested that somebody ought to attend the Christmas-morning service. The Vicar, himself an elderly and solitary man, would feel it sad to see the Raven pew quite empty, when only the last Christmas all the family had been there, including even his old friend the Squire.

"But is Evelyn quite able to go?" asked Mrs. Raven, rousing herself to remember the girl's indisposition of the evening before. Of course, nobody would expect her own

presence. "You look pale still, my dear; yet, if you feel better, it is certainly a beautiful morning, and the walk and the change will do you good, to say nothing of the soothing influence of the service."

She sighed as she ended. The service, she felt, would not soothe her. She felt like the strange weird creatures told of in ancient ballads, whom the sunshine cannot warm, who must not join in hymn or prayer. Had those old stories been but parables of real lives like hers, with a sin between themselves and God—a sin regretted, perhaps, but not repented of—a sin which nothing but full confession and entire surrender of its wrongful advantages could undo?

Frank and Evelyn went away together. They had scarcely walked out alone before. And Frank noticed a strange clinging, yet shrinking, timidity in her manner, utterly foreign to all he knew of her nature.

The little church was unusually well attended. The building was decorated in the old-fashioned style. Modern ecclesiastical

and decorative taste might scoff at the huge boughs of holly and yew simply bound to the lamps, or wound round the sturdy old pillars, but the Rector's pride lay in the number and hue of the bright berries thereon, and he would have thought the introduction of sham coral or artificial flowers nothing short of desecration.

The sound of the joyful, familiar hymns somewhat softened Frank's mood, and when, glancing down at his companion, he noticed that she remained silent through the singing, her lips tremulous, and her eyes suffused with tears, his feelings towards her grew quite kindly, and he felt absolutely remorseful for his recent suspicions and coldness.

He was so anxious to make some sort of atonement, that when the service was over, perhaps he rose too hastily to leave the church, for Evelyn put out her hand and caught him back, saying eagerly:

"Wait—wait a moment!"

Frank sat down again, and looked at the

old gilt inscription, which had been regularly produced every year since his childhood, "Glory be to God, and peace, good will towards men."

But Evelyn stood up, and watched the crowd slowly moving from the back seats. It was not till the building was nearly empty that she touched Frank on the shoulder, and said:

"Now let us go. Can't we go back some other way than through the village and by the lodge?" she whispered hurriedly, as they walked down the empty aisle. "Isn't there a little gate off the churchyard through which we could get inside the Court-grounds at once?"

"Yes," said Frank, "there is; and I suppose the master-key of all the Court-gates which I carry will open that too. But I'm not sure what sort of a path we shall find when we get inside, for it is never used, and I've not been that way for years."

"Oh, never mind that," she answered; "we

shall manage somehow. I do so want to escape the crowd!"

That at least they succeeded in doing. The people had moved off from the churchyard, but still lingered in the high-road, quite certain that the two would pass that way, and desirous of showing them the civility of courtesy and good wishes.

If Frank had kept to the height of his morning resolutions, he should not have allowed Evelyn to avoid the good folks. But his head ached, and he felt dazed and faint. During the quiet of the service, the reaction after the excitement of the night before had come on. And he was not sorry for the refuge offered by the gate, though when they passed within it he found his forebodings fulfilled, and they were in the midst of a thicket of small growing trees. For a moment he almost thought they would have to turn back; but looking round, he saw that the bushes were set well back from the fence, and that by skirting it they might make their way

through. They had to walk in Indian file, however, and could hear the voices on the other side, communicating their domestic interests, and commiserating the latest bad news about "Squire."

"I'm afraid I've been a very dull and stupid companion to-day," Frank said kindly, as he followed Evelyn; "but I really feel very faint and unwell. How you have recovered as you have is more than I can tell, when you were so poorly before you received the shock."

She paused, and half turned round.

"I think women are stronger than men," she said. "They can't lift such weights or run so fast, but they can bear more, and go through more. I must take care that you have a glass of wine the moment we get home."

"Dear me," said Frank playfully, "what is that sound? Something seems to have taken fright." It was somebody at the other side of the wall who started off into a rapid run.

Evelyn did not seem to notice the slight remark. For her next was a sequel to her former observations.

"Look at Aunt Gertrude!" she said. "I don't believe any of you men, though you admire her so much, half realize what her life has been. You may see what she has borne and done—but do you ever remember what she has gone without? You never think of the bright rooms and the pleasant holidays and the nice dresses that she has foregone. She has never said a word about these things to me; but if she could have had them, they would have been as great a delight to her as they are to anybody. You don't think of these things!"

"I should as soon think of them in connection with an angel in heaven," answered Frank, reverently.

Evelyn's sudden yearning towards Gertrude Agate took a characteristic form, but he liked the girl the better for it.

"I must go and see Aunt Gertrude soon," she exclaimed. "She feels like a refuge from

one's self and from the world! I suppose these are Christmas feelings," she broke off, with a light laugh, as they reached the Court. "I must not forget your wine. You really look white and wan. Mrs. Raven should not see you so."

She went straight to the dining-room, Frank following her.

A solitary decanter, with a little wine in it, stood on the sideboard. Possibly Evelyn did not think it looked very attractive, or she wished to offer Frank a choice of wines. For she opened the wine-cooler, and looked in. But it was empty.

"I know how that is," said Frank, watching her. "Budd is making a clearance of everything, that all may be started fresh and full for the festival of Christmas dinner! Poor old Budd will stick to his traditions! Kindly pour me out the wine there is."

Evelyn obeyed. And as she handed him the glass, he noticed that her hand trembled.

"I'm afraid you are not so much better as you seem," he said; "while I am a selfish

wretch, making an unnecessary fuss over myself."

At that moment James Sloam came in, bearing the great silver salver, newly polished.

"You may as well take these away with you," Evelyn said, handing him the empty decanter and glass.

Then she went off, saying she must go and see whether she could be of any service to Mrs. Raven, and to make her own preparations for dinner.

There was to be only one guest—the Vicar. —whose invitation, of course, had been issued long before Leonard's last attack. But this morning Mrs. Raven had sent Mr. Toynbee an intimation of Leonard's renewed illness, adding that she trusted he would not allow their fresh calamity and the shadow it must cast over their board, to deprive them of the solace and cheer of his society.

Christmas dinner was always spread early at the Court, because in bygone days it had been a very deliberate and toast-giving affair, with guests who had far to return on dark

and difficult roads, driven by coachmen who, in the servants' hall, had been possibly toast-giving, too. The old custom was kept up, though its use had departed.

But as Frank would not take long to dress, he had still two or three hours at his own disposal. He felt suddenly very weary and drowsy. Perhaps there was little wonder in that.

He went off to his own chamber and lay down. He must have sunk to sleep then and there, for he remembered no more, nor had he the least idea whether he had slept for hours or moments, when he was awakened, with a sudden start, by the sound of a violent crash in the hall below.

He sat upright. He heard many feet running. Then a woman's voice spoke sharply, and there were sounds as of the picking up and gathering of fragments. Clearly it was only one of those domestic accidents which seemed predestined to happen on occasions when the best family china and glass are brought out from their hiding-places.

Frank had only time to hope that the accident would neither shock Leonard's unconsciousness nor startle his nurses, when he became aware that his own room seemed rapidly spinning round him, and that his couch had apparently taken on the motion of a boat. In another moment he was deadly sick.

The sickness was short as it was violent. He lay back trembling, and with a singular sensation of weakness, but entirely relieved from his drowsiness and giddiness.

He lay so for some time. He remembered afterwards that he dreamily wondered whether people recovering from falls or from drowning might not feel much as he did. As the trembling subsided, and a little strength returned, he bethought him of the hour, though he did not imagine it was very long since he had retired. To his great surprise, he found it only wanted half an hour to dinner-time. Whether the time had passed so quickly before or after his sickness, he could hardly determine, but he at once

scrambled up, and proceeded to dress, though he had to sit down and rest two or three times during that process. He had scarcely finished his toilet, when Budd knocked hurriedly at the door to say that the Vicar was coming up the avenue, and there was nobody in the drawing-room to receive him. With a great effort, Frank managed to descend the stairs by the time Mr. Toynbee opened the hall-door.

"My dear fellow," cried the Vicar, "what's the matter with you? You look like a ghost yourself!"

"Hush!" said Frank. "I have just recovered from a smart bilious attack, and I don't want my mother to hear of it."

"A bilious attack before one's Christmas dinner is altogether unnatural," observed Mr. Toynbee good-humouredly. "And what is this about Leonard?" he added, with genuine concern. "Another fit? Poor fellow! poor fellow! And is your mother keeping up bravely?"

"I will answer for myself," said Mrs.

Raven, gliding into the room, and catching his last words. "I hope I am. One grows accustomed to pain, as eyes grow used to a darkened room."

"And Leonard is not conscious yet?" asked Mr. Toynbee.

"He opened his eyes once," she answered, "and said something which I could not catch. Another time he spoke, as it were, in his sleep. I heard what he said then. 'A face at the window!'"

"What did that mean, do you imagine?" inquired the Vicar.

"Ah," said Mrs. Raven, "you have not heard that this attack came on with his starting up, and pointing to the curtains which Frank had not drawn quite closely after he looked out at the weather."

"The delusion again!" commented the Vicar feelingly. "The same delusion evidently adapting itself to the altered circumstances. He had been worse all the week. I remember last time I saw you how distressed you were at his restlessness and irritability."

Dinner was gone through somehow, as such forms of festivity are, even when fasting is more in accordance with the mood of those who partake of them. Frank and the Vicar only lingered in the dining-room for a moment after the ladies left.

The Vicar poured out another glass of claret for himself, and pushed the jug to Frank, but the young man set it aside.

"By-the-way, Frank," said the old clergyman, "when you and I were talking over the ghost-rumours a little while back, do you remember my mentioning a stranger—a dark young man—whom I had seen sitting on the suicide's grave? He was in church to-day. So I suppose he is somebody's city cousin, who comes down here for change of air and holidays. But whose cousin, I wonder? Maybe some relation of Miss Wilmot—that's the old maid newly come to the post-office, you know. She's got a crowd of orphan nephews and nieces to help. She told me so."

Frank did not show much interest in the

matter, with which he could not see that he had the least concern.

And in the drawing-room the Vicar found his evening rather a dull one. Evelyn played some hymns and carols, but she couldn't sing, and Frank went and lay down on the sofa, and the old clergyman, who knew his suffering condition, good-naturedly did not even try to draw him into conversation. But the Reverend Jasper had the finest consideration for others' feelings, and would not emphasize the gloom of the occasion by an untimely exit, though he departed promptly when the accustomed early hour for separation arrived.

It was a fine moonlight night. To pass the post-office would not take him far out of his road to the Vicarage. He could not tell why he felt curious to know whether this young stranger, twice seen now, was really one of Miss Wilmot's nephews. But he did so feel. And Miss Wilmot was a stranger, in reduced circumstances, and lonely like himself. It would be no un-

neighbourly action, but quite the reverse, to look in and have a few minutes' chat with her.

The old lady's door was only on the latch, for in season and out of season she was accustomed to "oblige" her poor neighbours by all sorts of trifles from her varied stores. When the Vicar opened the door she looked up sharply, expecting to see somebody returned from an outing, and making petition for matches or candle.

But when she saw who it was she rose. Miss Wilmot had a low opinion of the world, because she did not consider it had appreciated herself, whom she held—and not undeservedly—in high esteem. But she thought better of the Vicar than of most people. There were times when she even thought the world did not seem to have appreciated him either!

"I thought I'd look in and give you all seasonable good wishes," he said genially. "I suppose you've got some of your young people down with you, keeping you company at this festive time?"

"Oh dear no, sir," returned Miss Wilmot. "It is not to be expected they have not livelier places to go to than this is. They only come here when they want something from me, sir."

"Oh, come, Miss Wilmot!" cried Mr. Toynbee. "I can't have you talk like that."

"But it's true," she persisted. "It's mere truth, if it ain't pleasant. A lone woman knows she's got to be put upon. Would any man, sir, have bought a business in a place like this," and she looked contemptuously round her demesne; "a little poky pigsty, that has not been set to rights for fifty years?"

"It certainly ought to be made a little lighter and airier," the Vicar admitted. "I must say a good word for you up at the Court. You'll be glad to hear that the Squire's doing as well as is possible, though I'm afraid his is a bad case. But we think he's getting on all right for this time."

"I'm glad to hear it, sir," said Miss Wilmot.

"I had a notion there was danger, likely. Do you think there mayn't be danger that isn't mentioned to his mother, maybe?"

"I think not," answered the Vicar, wondering, but only thinking that Miss Wilmot had a soured nature's delight in looking on the darkest side. "I must not forget to speak about your repairs at the first favourable opportunity. Good-night now, and a happy New Year to you."

"The same to you, sir; but it's a week off yet, and nobody knows what may happen between then and now. I do hope the Squire will be no worse, that's all. Thank you for looking in, sir. Good-night."

"For if there's nothing extra-dangerous with the Squire," mused the post-mistress, when she was left to herself, "then, for what on earth did that still, stuck-up nurse that they call Hannah write to Mrs. Raven's brother-in-law at Coltburn. I know her writing: 'The Rev. Mr. Connell,' as large as life, and marked 'Immediate,' for such was the letter she posted herself quite early

this morning, for I saw her. And, of course, she knows my tongue's tied! That is, if she thought of me. Folks think that post-people have no eyes nor ears, nor natural curiosity!"

CHAPTER IX.

DUST ON THE CARPET.

FRANK rose next day with a consciousness that he had not quite recovered from the previous day's suffering. He had no appetite for his breakfast. He sipped a little coffee and nibbled a little toast, but left his ham untouched.

"You have not had your favourite breakfast dish of apples lately," said Evelyn. "I must take care to order that some be upon the table to-morrow."

After breakfast he went back to his own room. He knew that no tenants would claim an interview with him on Boxing Day, and

Budd had a list of all the small douceurs to be distributed among that lower class of dependents, who had not been remembered on Christmas Eve with "the Squire's compliments." He would lie down and rest, and recuperate. He did not expect to be disturbed till lunch-time. But he issued no orders to that effect.

And if he had, they would have been probably disobeyed. For he had not been in retirement for an hour, and was just dropping into a soothing doze, when Budd's firm quiet rap fell on his door, and he heard the words :

"A telegram come for you, sir."

Frank sprang up. What could have happened at Coltburn, or in London ?

The message was from his uncle Connell, and it said :

"I am just now starting for Ravenscourt. Do not announce my coming till you see me."

Frank was mystified, but only for a moment. The next instant he decided that his uncle

had got some information from the detectives which he might have reason to think would be best imparted personally. Of course, the Connells knew nothing as yet of the renewed blow which had fallen on the Court family on Christmas Eve, for there had been nothing in it so urgent as to suggest a special message; rather, it tended towards that chronic sort of trouble which tempts to dull silence and endurance.

Frank marvelled what the coming revelation would be—for he felt sure there would be one—above all, whether any clue would be given as to the identity of the mysterious night wanderers. It was strange that this hope of discovery should re-awaken, just after the circumstances of Leonard's second attack had almost driven Frank to believe that the doctor's theory regarding it—that anything Leonard had seen was probably phantasmal—was correct. But Frank knew he would not have to wonder long. The train must be already swiftly bearing Mr. Connell in the track of his telegram.

He thrust his uncle's missive into his pocket, lay back again, and soon relapsed into the slumber from which Budd's knock had aroused him. His last waking thoughts were contradictory—the one being, "Is it because I have a good constitution that it insists thus upon repairing itself after the least damage?" and the other, "May this strange drowsiness be the earliest sign of the hereditary taint now manifest in my poor brother? Is the genuineness of our relationship to be proven in this terrible way?"

As he slept, he dreamed—a strange dream.

He heard a bell tolling, and he thought it was a death-knell for somebody. And there was a woman in black, walking up and down, whose face he could not see—but he knew she was Evelyn Agate. And something fell at her feet with a loud crack, and was broken. It was the red intaglio ring, and the stone had come loose from its setting. And the black figure picked up the hollowed gold frame, and the metal melted in her fingers and ran down her garment. And the stone

lay on the floor. And he knew it was left there for him.

He woke slowly this time, with his heart thumping heavily in his side. There was Budd's voice speaking outside the door, again. This time its tones were a little querulous.

"The lunch-bell has been a-ringing ever so long, sir," said Budd, "and Miss Evelyn has sent me up at last, sir, to see if anything is the matter."

"All right, all right, coming in a minute!" cried Frank, thinking to himself: "So much for my tragic vision, whose component parts are evidently a lunch-bell, a memory, and Budd's knock. Dear me, it is high time I began to feel strong again! If I'm not better before to-night, I'll speak to Dr. Wragge."

He went downstairs. Lunch was set, as it often was, not in the big dining-room, but in a little ante-chamber, furnished only by a small square table, some black Italian chairs, a thick Turkey carpet, and a few faded oil paintings.

The luncheon-cates of Raven Court were usually cold, and it was always an informal meal, for which nobody was expected to be punctual. Evelyn's urgency in the present instance was only explained by the fact that Mrs. Sims, out of consideration for her young master's recent indisposition, had sent up for him a basin of soup, whose savoury odour reached him as he approached the door of the room, in whose archway stood Evelyn, with an expression of countenance half-worried, half-scared, and wholly restless and unhappy.

"Oh, I am so sorry if I have kept you waiting," cried Frank. "I never heard the bell—or rather I heard it and made it up into a dream, for I had fallen asleep."

"You have not kept me waiting," she answered, with a manner very different from the gentle conciliating tone she had used since Frank came down to the Court. "I have had my lunch long ago, and have been in and out of the room several times, but I knew that cook had prepared this specially for you."

"I'm a spoiled baby," said Frank, sitting down, and sipping the soup. But either its flavour did not come up to its savour, or his appetite was still unreliable, for he only took two or three spoonfuls, and then began to dawdle.

"Dear me!" he cried, looking down to the floor beside him; "somebody has come in here with very dirty feet—or what can this mess be? It cannot be foot-prints," he added, looking round towards the door, "for there are none in that direction. The housemaid must have shaken her dust-pan, or Budd has dropped something from the scuttle."

"It is only light dust," said Evelyn; "I will clear it away in a moment." And she seized the hearth-broom and a newspaper, and proceeded to make good her word.

"Miss Evelyn, don't think of such a thing," Frank expostulated, penitently. "Why could not you call a servant?—not that there was any need for that, either," he added. "I don't know what made me notice such a thing."

Still he could not enjoy his soup, and he sat toying with his spoon. Evelyn stood in the long window, half-leaning against its side.

"Mr. Frank," she said, suddenly, speaking with an effort. "I really must go home to London. I wish I could go by the next train."

"You haven't had any bad news," asked Frank, alarmed.

"No," she said, in the same odd half-defiant tone. "No—don't you remember I told you yesterday that I felt I must see Aunt Gertrude soon? Something is driving me to London. How do I know that she may not be wanting me as much as I want her?" she added, with a spice of mockery in her voice, which yet did not deduct from the urgency of her manner. "I really must go."

"I'm sure my mother would be the first to wish to gratify a feeling of this kind," Frank answered. "You remember she asked you some time ago whether you would not like to

spend Christmas with your aunt. But you declined then."

"Yes, I know," said Evelyn. "But now I have a feeling that I must go."

"Let me assure you I believe this anxiety only originates in the sentiments this season wakes, and in the nervous shock we have all received by late events," said Frank. "Don't be uneasy. Need you be in quite such a hurry? Can't you wait till to-morrow? I understand the terrible prescience as of impending misfortune, for I have known it myself. I may say I know it a little just now, because I am out of sorts, and our surroundings here are dismal. Do wait till to-morrow, Miss Evelyn, if you possibly can; it will be a personal favour to me."

He used the last phrase in sheer desperation. The deadly giddiness and sickness were creeping up again, and if he would not sink to the floor where he stood, he must hurry away to his couch.

Evelyn looked at him silently, but made no answer. He could only hope from her

manner that she would yield to his persuasion, if she could so far restrain her strange, sudden hunger for her London home. But he dared not linger then for further parley.

"Will you kindly tell Budd to send Dr. Wragge to my room when he comes?" he said, faintly; "and also say that if any unexpected visitor arrives, I am to be told immediately."

He turned and left her standing mute by the luncheon-table. She expressed no concern, offered no sympathy. As he went through the door, she took one hasty step after him, and stretched out her hands, as if she was going to say something.

But he was gone, and had not seen the gesture.

She went back to the window, opened it, put out her head, looked slowly and cautiously round, then drew back into the room and secured the casement by a heavy hasp, which was seldom fastened even at night. Then she drew a side-table right across the width of the window. It was a heavy table, though

it had a slight appearance; and it took all her strength to move it, though she had plenty to exert and exerted it all. Then she rang the bell.

"Dear, dear," Budd ventured to say, as he packed his tray, "and the young master hasn't taken the soup; he can't be himself again yet, miss."

"No, he is not—not quite," said Evelyn. And she delivered Frank's orders.

There were head-shakings and lamentations when Budd carried the news of Frank's continued indisposition to the servants' quarters.

"Master Frank wouldn't ask for the doctor for nothing," bewailed Mrs. Sims. "God forbid that he isn't took off sudden, and we left with that poor soul, Mr. Leonard, neither living nor dead, for our master. It's often the way, that is. There, James Sloam, take you that cup of soup and finish it up, for it's better than anything you've ever tasted, and it 'ud be a sin and a shame to waste it."

CHAPTER X.

A CLUE TRACED HOME.

THERE was only one person who went out over the threshold of Ravenscourt that afternoon.

Nurse Hannah went straight to the railway station. She would not have long to wait before the train which would bring any travellers from Coltburn must arrive. She would make no mistake as to the identity of the Reverend Mr. Connell. She knew him well enough. And when he should see her, she knew he would know her, too.

The old gentleman was leaning from his carriage-window as the train drew up. He expected he should see his nephew Frank.

For though the letter he had received from Nurse Hannah had told him of his elder nephew's attack, it had had no word of Frank's indisposition. But instead of Frank Raven, he saw a face with which he had been familiar enough in Coltburn streets—the quiet, contented face of a working-woman, yet in early middle-age. He knew that face best in such substantial finery as decent females of that class affect, yet it was not disguised from him by the nurse's cloak and close bonnet.

"Mrs. Cran?" he questioned, as he came towards her.

She curtsied, and answered in a significant tone:

"Nurse Hannah, at your service, sir."

"I suppose your husband knows that you have written to me?" he said.

"You may be sure of that, sir. And he knows a great deal more. He's not far off now, sir," she observed, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

The minister glanced furtively around.

Everybody had already left the station, except one shabby man, with a patch over his left eye, who was resting a pack upon his knee, and busily re-arranging its paltry contents. Could that possibly be the trim and active Cran? Nurse Hannah gave a merry little laugh.

"And so you've found out something at last?" asked Mr. Connell.

He walked by the side of Nurse Hannah. Nobody who might meet them, knowing her position, could see anything strange in that.

"I found out on Christmas Eve who the woman-ghost is," she answered. "Directly she came on the scene I suspected who she was, though Cran wouldn't be sure."

It was clear that in his own house even the astute Cran had to bear the humiliating feminine "I told you so."

"And——" prompted the minister.

"And it's only Miss Evelyn Agate," said Nurse Hannah quietly.

Mr. Connell almost stood still, but re-collected himself and went on.

"I haven't found out the man who walks with her yet, I own," Nurse Hannah went on; "but that can't take long now. She goes out in her light dressing-gown, sir. And it isn't through the Court doors that she goes at that hour, you may be sure, sir. But there's a door from the drawing-room into the corridor leading to the conservatory, and in that corridor there is a window that is never hasped. You understand me, sir?"

"Are you sure it is she? May not the disguise deceive you?" asked Mr. Connell.

"Sir," she said, "I saw the light-dressed figure first, and then, all of a sudden, young miss in her black silk evening-dress."

"But can you be sure the two are one and the same?" urged Mr. Connell.

"Trust me, sir," she said; "besides, I went back over the path she'd come, and there I picked up a green dressing-gown. She'd slipped it off when she saw me. She went back to look for it afterwards, and not finding it, hasn't been quite easy in her mind, I think, ever since."

"You could swear it was her dressing-gown?" asked Mr. Connell, in whose mind this revelation was lighting up such a train of past mysteries.

"Somebody can, I should think, sir," answered the nurse. "Though it's a common green cashmere, and I've never seen her wear it since I've been here. But it's been mended in one or two places, by which somebody may be able to prove it. There's been a bit of the hem-lining torn out, and a strip of sprigged muslin sewn in, and even that's got a little torn, too, in its turn."

"Dear, dear," cried Mr. Connell. "I know about that sprigged muslin. My nephew seems to have had some suspicion raised about that. For he had seen some of that sort belonging to my governess, and he wrote asking her where she had got it, and she told him she had bought it at a shop in Gerstowe, and she had the remnant still. And some time after, it came out accidentally that my eldest daughter had taken a bit from my governess's work-basket, and given it to

Miss Agate to mend something with while she was staying at our house. We did not think it worth while to open a new correspondence with Frank on such a matter."

Nurse Hannah shook her head.

"You gentlefolks who mean to tell the truth, and try to choose what is worth telling, give us more trouble than those who set themselves to deceive us," she said. "But that will identify the dressing-gown, sir."

"You see, we outsiders can't help shrinking from anything which seems like spying on our unconscious neighbours," observed Mr. Connell, in self-excuse.

Nurse Hannah laughed.

"I won't say it's a shame that we should be set to do what you wouldn't do yourselves, sir," she said. "I know it ain't nice work. But one gets into the spirit of it, sir. And while there's dirt, there must be brooms. That was what Cran used to say to me, when I didn't like the thought of his calling before we were married. But what I was saying, sir, is, that there's nothing puts one on the

wrong scent so much as hearing the truth, with bits left out between. It is the very thing we do ourselves, sir, just to set folks off the track. I'm here under the family doctor's orders, sir, as he believes, and all I told him and all he knows is gospel-truth. Only I did not tell him I was married to Cran the detective, now."

"But," said Mr. Connell, half-pausing, and turning towards Nurse Hannah, "one cannot help regarding all these apparitions as in relation of some sort to each other; and yet the big, angry night-wanderer was talked about and seen, it was asserted, long ago—years before Miss Evelyn came to the Court. Why, I have actually fancied she was engaged here because of the low state of Mrs. Raven's spirits, partly consequent on this sort of thing."

"That is likely," admitted Nurse Hannah. "I find that the story of the ghost—a very old story, I hear, sir—was much revived after a strange woman—a sort of fortune-teller—had been staying at Ravenstoke. Nobody

can remember more of her name than that it was something 'queer and outlandish.' I have no doubt she is identical with Madame Allebasi Elah, who called herself the 'Oriental Mystery,' at Coltburn. This shows some hostile influence bearing on the Raven family before the coming of Miss Evelyn. She *may* be only one of its tools."

Nurse Hannah conceded so much, evidently with reluctance.

"Of course, I suppose I needn't ask whether you know Miss Evelyn's own history?" asked the minister. "Are you quite satisfied about the people who brought her up? My own son is friendly with them, and has great faith in them."

"Oh, they are all right," answered the nurse promptly. "My husband has had his eye on them; he soon found all was open and aboveboard there. They have had their quarrel with the world right out, poor things. There's something queer about their servant, though. We shall be sorry if this young minx brings more trouble on the Agates,"

said Nurse Hannah, with a touch of almost pathetic tenderness.

"And have you the least suspicion of anybody else in the Court household—do you imagine collusion in any quarter, or anything of that kind?" asked Mr. Connell.

Nurse Hannah shook her head.

"I have my own suspicions," she said; "we all have them, say what we may. But what we've got to begin on now, will do. You're one of the family, sir. Did you ever hear of a man called Eldred Sloam, down here, sir?"

"I think I've heard the name accidentally," pondered the minister. "Somehow, I have an unpleasant impression concerning it."

"He's only an ill-doing man, at war with the world," returned plain-spoken Nurse Hannah, "but there seems no mistake about his being the unfortunate and unowned son of the old Squire—not the late Squire, your brother-in-law, sir—but his uncle, to whom he succeeded, the one you have just named Squire Eldred."

"I never heard of that," said Mr. Connell, thinking within himself that the poor suffer a great injustice by having the sins of the rich thrust down among them in this unceremonious way.

"It seems his mother was a sister of Mrs. Charity Hale, who is still at the Court," the nurse went on. "And the ghost is always between Sloam's cottage and the Court, sir. And I've found out that the fortune-teller, when she was in Ravenstoke, had a word to say on a link between those two places. Oh, I forgot to tell you, sir, Mrs. Raven went to see that woman while she was staying in the village—at the Pitchfork Inn. The servants say it was she who made the fortune-teller go off. Did Mrs. Raven ever tell you about it, if you happened to be talking over 'the Oriental Mystery' at Coltburn, sir?"

"Never, certainly," answered Mr. Connell.

"H'm!" mused Nurse Hannah. "I wonder if the lady did send the witch away, or if the witch had done her work for the time being, when she'd seen the lady?"

"But, dear me, sir, there must be something wrong at the Court—look at the bustling to and fro!"

They quickened their pace. Janet Mackay came running down the avenue towards them, crying:

"Oh, Mrs. Hannah, we've been looking for you high and low. There's Master Frank lying insensible, in his own bedroom, and there's poor James Sloam taken mortally bad in the kitchen. We've sent off all ways for the doctors already, and we've done what we could, and——"

"Hush!" said Nurse Hannah authoritatively. "This gentleman is Mr. Connell, Mrs. Raven's brother-in-law, come down on a visit. Take us at once to Mr. Frank's room."

Mrs. Raven was already there, and so were Budd and Mrs. Sims. Everybody made way for Nurse Hannah, and nobody took much heed of Mr. Connell. The experienced woman proceeded to make a few rapid observations, and then prepared for stringent measures.

"What had Mr. Frank taken last?" she asked, as she went forward with her preparations.

"A beautiful basin of as good soup as ever you saw," wailed Mrs. Sims; "leastway, he did not take it—what he left I gave to poor James."

"And he's ill too!" said the nurse.

"Ma'am," said Mrs. Sims, reproachfully, "you ought to know the young master was ill yesterday. But there! them as is trained nurses don't take as much note o' sickness, though it's their business, as those that have been bred about a place and have human hearts in their bosoms."

"What had he taken yesterday before he was sick?" asked the nurse, heedless of this reproach.

"Only a glass o' wine," said Mrs. Sims. "I asked Jem that at once. 'A glass o' wine,' answers James Sloam, 'the last in the bottle. Miss Evelyn sent it down to be cleaned afterwards.'"

"Was it cleaned?" asked Nurse Hannah.

Her questions seemed put almost in absent-mindedness.

"No," said Mrs. Sims with contempt; "there's no bottle-washing about my place on a Christmas morning. It was put away to be done in its proper time."

"Just go down and see how the foot-boy is, and do for him as you see I am doing for Mr. Frank," said Nurse Hannah; "and you may fetch that bottle too, and bring it upstairs and give it to Mr. Connell to take care of."

Mrs. Sims went away, muttering.

"Who served up lunch to-day—you, Budd, I suppose?" said the nurse, wringing out a sponge with one masterly twist.

"Yes, ma'am, I did," said the awed Budd.

"And who was in the room?"

"Only Miss Evelyn, ma'am." He glanced across the bed to Mrs. Raven, who crouched there, with wrung hands. "The mistress," said Budd, "did not come down to-day."

"Thank you, Budd," said the nurse.

"Now, Mr. Connell, may I trouble you to step this way for an instant."

She made as though she required his help in moving Frank. While he rendered it, she whispered to the minister:

"Please go in search of Miss Agate, and make sure that she does not leave the house. Also please go down to the lodge-gate and stick a torn envelope on one of the palings there. That will bring in Cran in less than half an hour."

Mr. Connell obeyed like one in a dream. He was fairly dumbfounded by the unexpected and entirely tragic turn affairs had taken. It was long before he could realize whether it was fact or imagination that, while he stood beside the motionless, cowering figure of Mrs. Raven, he had heard her murmur, more than once:

"Theodore—Theodore Agate! you are avenged!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE LAST OF POOR JAMES.

MR. CONNELL resolved to execute the latter part of his commission first. For it seemed to him that no time should be lost in securing the presence of Cran. Nurse Hannah was very clever—almost too clever, he thought. Perhaps she was rash.

The little minister was shocked to find himself conscious of a certain humour in his errand, as he stretched himself on tiptoe, and thrust over the railing-head the envelope of some charitable circular which he chanced to have in his pocket. Mr. Connell would never again be able to pass a dangling string

or a chalk hieroglyphic without a secret wonderment.

He made his way back to the house, and asked the first servant he met where Miss Evelyn was. This servant chanced to be a great crony of James Sloam's, and she was holding her apron to her eyes. She "hadn't seen Miss Evelyn since morning."

Mr. Connell began to feel uneasy.

"Where should he be likely to find her? Which was Miss Evelyn's own room?"

She led him to the end of the passage leading to it, and pointed out its door.

Mr. Connell knocked boldly. There was a strange, shuffling sound in the room, as of some heavy article suddenly pushed along the floor. Then there was a second's pause, and then the voice of her he was seeking called "Come in," and at the same instant she unlocked the door. She did not utter any exclamation of surprise when she saw who it was, though, of course, she knew nothing of the telegram announcing his coming. Mr. Connell remembered that after-

wards, though at the moment it did not strike him.

"Miss Evelyn," he said, "there is terrible trouble in this house."

"Yes," she answered quietly, "I know that."

"The doctor will be here in a few minutes," he went on, struck and chilled by something in her manner. "In the meantime, I regret to say that I think the nurse suspects that Mr. Frank has been in some way poisoned. We must have Mrs. Raven out of her son's chamber before the medical man comes. I shall want your assistance to coax her downstairs, where we will both sit with her."

Evelyn did not answer him; indeed, she scarcely seemed to follow his words. Only she glanced back into her room; and his eyes followed hers. And then Mr. Connell saw something trivial in itself, but significant under the circumstances. The drapings of the toilet-table were slightly caught up, and revealed the handle of a small portmanteau, with its unfastened strap trailing out upon

the carpet. This was the heavy thing whose hasty thrusting away Mr. Connell had heard as he knocked at the door. The lady-companion had been secretly preparing for an untimely departure.

The minister became at once cool and ready. It was one thing to follow up suspicions which might be ill-grounded, and quite another thing to face facts. He looked steadily at Evelyn, as he said:

"I suppose I need not tell you, Miss Agate, that orders are issued that nobody mayleave the Court on any pretence, and that any sign of secret movement is likely to draw dire suspicion on itself."

"Oh, I can quite understand that," answered Evelyn, with a forced return to her ordinary glib manner. "And really it is very unfortunate for me, for I had been speaking to Mr. Frank about paying a short visit to my friends in London."

There was something in Evelyn's face which belied the confidence of her tone and words. It had hard and haggard lines in it

now. She walked before him down the corridor. At its end they met Budd, who whispered: "The doctors are here, sir."

Perhaps the medical men wondered why the uncle did not accompany them to Frank's room. But Mr. Connell was now fully convinced of the need of keeping a sharp eye on Evelyn Agate. He went downstairs with her. She chose to go into the little room where Frank had last taken lunch. She sat down in silence. Mr. Connell did not take a seat. He stood by the window, gazing out at the sweet, still scene, with a pale afternoon sunlight lingering on the tops of the bare trees.

The doctors did not stay very long upstairs. Frank had had the benefit of Nurse Hannah's skilful ministrations, and from the report they heard of James Sloam's state, they judged him to be in more urgent need for their aid. They looked in upon Mr. Connell as they went down, to reassure him concerning his nephew. Whether Nurse Hannah had communicated anything what-

ever to the doctors, Mr. Connell could not guess; but Dr. Wragge greeted Evelyn coldly, even while he suggested that her help and that of Mr. Connell might be required, since so much assistance was already diverted to the other sufferer, Frank.

The footboy, James Sloam, who had never slept at the Court since his father's illness, had, at the beginning of his indisposition, been carried to Budd's private room, and still lay there, on an old-fashioned horse-hair sofa. One or two of the younger servants and Charity Hale were with him.

Like Frank, he was unconscious, but Mr. Connell could see the difference between the condition of the sick boy and that of his young master. This one was clearly struck to death. The doctors shook their heads as they bent over him.

"You can't save him," said Charity, in a low, sad voice. Then turning to Evelyn, she added, "Dying beds are no place for fine ladies like you."

"Hush!" commanded Mr. Connell im-

peratively; and then asked, "Do the boy's friends live near here?"

"He has not got any friends," said Charity grimly. "He's only got a father, and I've sent for him already. And here he comes," she said, looking up as a tall and heavy figure passing by outside darkened the little window of the low room, and Eldred Sloam's steps were presently heard at its door.

"So our Jem is taken bad, is he?" the man asked gruffly.

"He's at death's door," said Charity quietly; "the doctors won't be able to do anything. Our Mr. Frank and your James have both taken something wrong, and Jem does not seem able to shake it off, as we hope the master is doing. It's at these times one's ways o' living tell," she added in stern and bitter rebuke of the negligent father, "and poor Jem lived mean enough till he came to the Court."

Suddenly the doctors drew back from the bed.

"Let the father come near," said Dr. Wragge.

The suffering boy's moans had almost ceased; the pinched, pained look was fading from his face, but something different from its accustomed homeliness was fast settling there. Eldred Sloam hesitated—he almost recoiled. Was this his boy Jem, his starved, neglected, beaten child—this awful, silent figure? He had seen one like it before.

"He's turnin' like his mother," Eldred whispered.

"He always was like her," said Charity sternly; "and those that are like in life are always liker still in death."

"Jem, Jem," whispered Eldred, "don't you know me, Jem? Won't you open your eyes? Don't you know your father?"

A something passed over the still figure—a flutter—it seemed less within the frame than without it. It was life's last effort to respond to a familiar voice. The honest boyish blue eyes scarcely opened, but the lips parted with one or two words which

nobody heard. Only they left a smile behind them—the strange, surprised smile of the dead.

"It's all over," said Charity. Her voice was a little softer.

"Didn't he say aught to me?" asked Eldred chokingly. The slow emotion of a debased nature is a terrible thing to see.

"I'm sure he said something kind," said Mr. Connell. "See, that smile is left for you. His pain is all over now."

"But who gave it to him?" demanded Eldred, taking refuge from remorseful grief in sudden indignation and sense of injury. "Who gave it to him? Took something wrong, did they, both of them—Jem and the master? What was it?"

"These are questions for us and the lawyers, my good friend," said Dr. Wragge quietly; "and you may rest assured they shall not go unanswered long."

"Of course the emptied basin of soup and the wine-bottle and all such things are duly secured," whispered the medical man to

Mr. Connell, as they passed out of the room together.

"Yes, certainly. Nurse Hannah ordered them all to be given to me, and they are locked in my own room," said Mr. Connell, "and I have the key with me."

They stood aside, and allowed Evelyn and the other doctor to pass. Dr. Wragge and Mr. Connell exchanged glances. Dr. Wragge gave an almost imperceptible nod, and without one word the minister understood that he might resign his surveillance of the young lady into the hands of that other medical man.

Eldred Sloam had also lingered behind with Charity. He had only observed Evelyn as the people in the room had moved. But his eyes seemed riveted to her.

"Who is that? the young miss?" he whispered.

"Didn't you ever see her before?" asked Charity, with a peculiar dryness. "She was up seeing you when you were raving, Eldred. She's a Miss Agate."

"The companion? I have never seen her before," he said, with strange interest.

"You are not likely to see her at the Pitchfork and such places," said Charity, in her most acrid tones. "You'd better be thinking o' poor Jem."

"He's real like his mother now," said Eldred, again.

"Boys do take after their mothers and gals after their fathers, often," snapped Charity. "Is it not a good thing you haven't a daughter, Eldred? She mightn't be a blessing to you or the world."

"It's queer that the young gentleman should be getting better an' my lad gone," persisted Eldred. "I reckon them, whoever got the wrong stuff, didn't mean that. But things always go hardest with the poor."

"Is your clever housekeeper with you now, Eldred?" asked Charity.

"She is not," whispered Eldred. "Send somebody to me, Mrs. Hale. Could you not come yourself?"

"I'll see," said Charity shortly; and as the

two left the death-chamber, they found Mr. Connell and Dr. Wragge still standing in the passage, talking earnestly.

"Delay often only defeats the ends of justice," said the doctor.

"But it is such an awful charge to bring against the girl!" whispered the minister.

"It is such an awful deed! But this man Cran says that he holds clues to motives and so forth. And we ourselves know most damaging facts."

"But as yet we don't even know what poison has been used," pleaded Mr. Connell.

"That will be easily proved," said the doctor promptly. "The symptoms are so well marked that I know what to look for—a terrible drug, sir—simulates natural symptoms so well, that a medical man might have been easily deceived but for the accident of the two cases arising together. No time must be lost, Mr. Connell. Of course, there need be no publicity for a day or two. Certainly not till after the inquest."

"Then I must telegraph at once to my son Philip, in London, and bid him prepare that poor, sorrow-stricken household which has reared and sheltered this monster!" said Mr. Connell, wringing his hands.

"The Reverend Jasper Toynbee, sir," announced Budd, suddenly coming up at that moment, with his old hands trembling and his old eyes full of tears. "The Reverend Jasper Toynbee, sir, is wanting to see you. That's our vicar," he explained, in case Mr. Connell had forgotten the name.

"Thank God that he is here!" exclaimed Mr. Connell, most sincerely. Here was somebody whose pity might be able, like his own, to reach even the sinner. At that moment the good minister's thoughts were not of the "ends of justice" so much as of the forlorn girl on whom the weight of a terrible accusation was about to fall—it was the thought of her guilt and her loneliness which appalled him—and with a true father's heart he fancied he saw one of his own little girls in her awful position.

Mr. Connell followed Budd and Dr. Wragge like one in a dream. Like one in a dream, too, he saw Cran and another man lingering in the hall. He went into the luncheon-room, and there he found the strange doctor and Evelyn, and a pleasant-faced old clergyman with white hair, who bowed to him, whom he knew as in a dream to be the Vicar, Mr. Toynbee. Nobody spoke. He heard Dr. Wragge outside whispering with Cran, and then they both came in. Mr. Cran walked up beside Evelyn, and said something to her in a low, civil tone of voice.

Evelyn stood up, straight and white.

"What is this?" she said. "What is this all about?"

She turned to Mr. Toynbee. Evil news must ever fly quickly, for it was evident that the Vicar fully comprehended the situation.

"You are suspected of administering this poison," he said in a sad, slow voice.

To his dying day Mr. Connell never forgot Evelyn's face at that moment. He could

never describe the change which came over it. It could not turn whiter or more fixed than it had been before. But there came upon it a look of mingled fear and hope—a something of wild triumph with a strange gleam of something softer in it. It might be singular, but at that moment of terror and humiliation she drew nearer to his sympathies than ever she had in the heyday of her cold and careless beauty.

"You are not called upon to say anything, remember," Mr. Cran warned her. "You may if you like, you know, but it can be used against you afterwards."

"I did not say anything, did I?" she asked, turning to him witheringly. The strange storm-light had died out in her face, leaving it only hard and still.

"We will take you upstairs to Nurse Hannah's room," said Cran; "we can't let you go to your own room, you know. Is there anything you would like?"

She reflected.

"No," she said; "only let Nurse Hannah

come with me: nobody else—none of the people I know."

"Well," said Cran, aside to Mr. Toynbee, "I've never before come across one that didn't think it worth while even to claim innocence. They may know it's no use, but they all think it sounds well."

Evelyn went out with her calm, even step, walking beside the trim female detective. And as she passed him, Mr. Connell noticed on her dress a shred of wool from some little handiwork in which she had been recently engaged. It tore his heart to see it. She too had had her harmless human hours!

CHAPTER XII.

THE VICAR TAKES THE RESPONSIBILITY OF REPAIRS.

IT was Charity Hale who carried Mrs. Raven the news of the suspicion that had fallen on Evelyn.

Mrs. Raven had been banished from Frank's bedroom by the order of the doctor. This had been a necessary measure, so extreme was her prostration. She was now lying on her own bed, and at her request Janet Mackay had left her alone. But when she heard Charity Hale's knock she said:

"Come in."

"They've found out there's been dark work, ma'am," said the old woman, standing where she could not see her lady's face. "There's been something queer going on for a long time, and it turns out that Nurse Hannah belongs to the police, and she's got Miss Evelyn under her charge now."

"Got Miss Evelyn under her charge?" gasped Mrs. Raven.

"Yes, ma'am," answered Charity. "It's about poisoning—that's what they say was done to Mr. Frank and poor James. I'll not believe she did it, unless she's been made a cat's-paw. There's somebody else behind. What motive could *she* have?"

"There was that wicked fortune-teller," cried the lady, sitting upright on her bed.

Charity gave a low, incredulous laugh.

"Do you remember her, ma'am? She was in Ravenstoke long before Miss Evelyn came to the Court, ma'am," Charity added slily, and listened eagerly for the reply.

"I believe it must have been the same woman who was in Coltburn, during our visit

there," said Mrs. Raven excitedly. "But how is Frank?—how is Frank, Charity?"

"He is doing well, I think, ma'am," Charity replied. "But poor James is dead. It is not likely the poison was meant for him. And *I* don't believe Miss Evelyn meant poison for Mr. Frank either. There is nothing wrong lying about here that she might have taken by mistake, is there, ma'am?" And the old woman peered round, as if she thought that deadly drugs might lie at random in a lady's peaceful bed-chamber.

"No, no, nothing," said Mrs. Raven impatiently. "But that fortune-teller must be found. The police must be told all about her and her sayings—I must tell them myself, if nobody else can do it as well."

"I should be very glad to see her too, ma'am," said Charity, stooping to pick up an infinitesimal shred from the carpet. "I've always had a notion that she might be made to tell us something about the ghosts."

"Did you ever see her yourself, at all, Charity?" asked Mrs. Raven suddenly.

"I never went consulting her, ma'am," Charity answered evasively. "I may have seen her—anybody may see anybody else."

"I must have her sought for immediately," Mrs. Raven went on, rising from her couch. "I have certain—suspicions—which may be worth suggesting—something about an occurrence at Coltburn, too. And when did Mr. Connell come?" asked Mrs. Raven slowly. "What made him come, I wonder? I suppose he must have heard somehow about Leonard."

"He came this afternoon," said Charity; "and I suppose, ma'am, it will be the duty of each of us to tell all that we know, and all that we suspect, now," she added.

Mrs. Raven replied quietly:

"Yes."

"It's my belief that evil will out. I'm afraid it's no use trying to hush it up to save ourselves or to serve others," said the old woman.

"It is no use," returned Mrs. Raven in the same quiet slow tone. "And when we

strive to hide things, we are only forced to speak about them when it is too late."

"It's awful to think o' Miss Evelyn," added Charity, with a side-glance towards her mistress. "Not that I set much store on the pain of a bad conscience. But the better we've carried out our wicked ways, the greater come-down it must be to be found out; isn't it so, ma'am?"

"Charity," said Mrs. Raven, turning towards her, and fixing her eyes so full on the wizened old woman's face that even the peering eyes quailed and fell beneath her glance—"Charity, I can understand that the being found out may be the greatest blessing that can befall the sinner. I am only afraid it is too good to happen to some people!"

She did not add another word, but turned and walked from the room.

"Well!" ejaculated Charity, recovering herself the moment her mistress was out of sight. "It's the gentry's way, I know, to always make believe that they choose what

they have to put up with. But I reckon it's seldom been carried as far as this. And she seems almost to have forgotten Mr. Leonard. And the doctors say he's very bad, and getting worse. There'll be no ghosts walking in Raven fields to-night, I fancy. At least none that folks can see—and who cares for any other sort? Eh me, and poor James is gone. He took after his mother, I know —not after Eldred. But I'll take care he shall lie in the best linen from the Raven press."

Mr. Connell and Mr. Toynbee had wandered into the drawing-room. They had not cared to stay in the little luncheon-room, whose very atmosphere seemed to them laden with crime and mystery.

"'There is something deep at the bottom of this affair," the Vicar confided. "Do you happen to know anything of the history of this young woman, Mr. Connell?"

"I know only that she is a foundling, adopted and reared by a very clever and estimable lady," returned the minister.

"A foundling—adopted?" questioned Mr. Toynbee. "So ho! Somebody told me she was an orphan, brought up by an aunt. Who could that informant have been, now, I wonder? Ah, I recollect; it was Leonard Raven himself, the very last day I saw him before the beginning of his illness. A foundling—adopted, eh? Was she introduced to the Court through your family, sir, may I ask?"

"No; through an advertisement, I believe," answered Mr. Connell. He felt sore and irritable, he scarcely knew why. A sensitive man always feels the blows which are falling on others, and is almost morbidly acute to any unfairness shown by the stronger party. "It is all very sad. And I fear that the very circumstances which should commend this friendless creature—a nameless foundling—to our utmost justice and forbearance, will with most people only serve to condemn her."

"No, no, I hope not," said the Vicar, pacing to and fro meditatively. He knew

how hard it was for him to reveal anything now that might go against her. But it was no longer a time for the suppression of facts. "Only I had a curious conviction about this girl which would not dovetail with what I had been told about her. And I think it may with what you tell me now."

Mr. Connell sat silent, and expectant.

"Did you notice that man in the butler's room?" asked the Vicar, stopping short. "I mean that poor lad's father, the fine-looking, dissipated labourer? That's Eldred Sloam."

"Is that he?" responded Mr. Connell, remembering that Nurse Hannah had seemed to have some suspicions in that quarter.

"Do you know who he is said to be—is in fact known to be?" inquired the Vicar.

"I was told of it, by Nurse Hannah, only this afternoon," answered the mimister. "I think I've heard the name before somewhere."

"He has been a bad fellow all through," said the Vicar. "He was a bad husband to

that poor lad's mother, and he had a bad character even before he married her. In his young days there was one girl he went after for whom everybody was sorry. Her name was Hester Walker. I knew her very well, for she was a favourite servant in a house where I often visited. Nobody knew what became of her, and Eldred got into a good deal of bad odour over that affair. Some people thought she had made away with herself, and some people seemed to suspect him of making away with her. I didn't—not of that last part. But whatever she was driven to, it was he who had driven her to it."

Mr. Toynbee paused for a moment, and then went on.

"The last time I ever saw Hester Walker was one evening while I was visiting a sick parishioner. I chanced to look out of the window and saw her and Eldred Sloam standing talking at a gate near. The man was leaning over it, twirling a flower in his mouth with hard and cruel indifference

written in every line of his face and figure. She was standing in front of him, wringing her hands, and looking up into his face as if she was straining her whole soul to see into his."

He paused again. Mr. Connell asked:

"But how do you connect this with Miss Evelyn?"

"Listen," said the Rector. "The moment I set eyes on Mrs. Raven's new companion, I felt sure I had seen her before, or else somebody very like her. And sometimes by this sort of lurking memory I felt attracted to her, and sometimes again repelled. But I could never make it out——" he paused once more.

"Until——" prompted Mr. Connell.

"Until one night when Eldred Sloam was ill, and Charity Hale and Miss Evelyn came over to his cottage while I was there. He was delirious, and in his raving he saw the young lady and was frightened at her."

"Frightened at her!" echoed Mr. Connell.

"Yes, he seemed to think she was somebody whom he had injured. He caught hold of her hand, and she, naturally enough, drew back. Sir, at that moment the old scene of the summer evening at the gate rose before my mind, because it seemed repeated before my eyes! Repeated, and yet transposed. The pleading agony of that unhappy girl, Hester Walker, seemed to have entered Eldred Sloam, and a woman with the features of Hester Walker was spurning him as he had once spurned her! I read my riddle. Evelyn Agate had the face of Hester Walker, but the expression and the hair of this man, Sloam. Think of him, even as you saw him to-day. Can you not see a likeness?"

"It is hard to say whether or no, when one gets a preconceived idea," said Mr. Connell. "But then, if there is anything in your theory, where is Hester Walker herself? And who is she?"

"Where and who is Evelyn Agate's mother, whoever she may be?" retorted the Vicar.

"But even supposing this to be a fact," said Mr. Connell reflectively, "I don't see how it bears on the present position of things. It does not supply a motive. If Evelyn Agate is the daughter of this man—even if she knows she is his daughter, how could the death of Frank Raven serve her?"

"It might be malice," mused the Vicar; "a kind of wild revenge for the wrong done to her father by his illegitimacy. But I wouldn't set much by that possibility. My own experience is, that natures capable of strong feelings of indignation of that sort are usually also capable of still stronger feelings of the magnanimous and restraining kind. I would look for some nearer-hand, more mercenary motive. Under that strange will of his father's, if Frank should die before his mother, her fortune is at her own disposal. Could Miss Evelyn hope to ingratiate herself into the vacant place?"

"It is too horrible to contemplate!" exclaimed Mr. Connell.

"Well, well," said Mr. Toynbee, somewhat recoiling from the picture he had conjured up; "but at any rate this fact of her birth—if it be one—would bring her within the range of motives which could not affect an utter stranger. Most crimes have a motive—nay, I believe all must have—only those of insanity may be so utterly out of the line of reason that they are not easily conjectured by sane people. But I would not imagine there is any insanity about Evelyn Agate."

"One thing I must do, and that at once," said Mr. Connell: "I must telegraph to Philip to go to the house of his friend Miss Agate, and break this terrible news to her, and then come down here as quickly as possible. Probably Miss Gertrude Agate will accompany him. I must telegraph home, too. It would never do for them to receive such tidings as this through the public prints. And one never knows how soon they may seize on rumours."

"Could not Mrs. Connell come here to

bear Mrs. Raven company?" asked the Vicar, as the two gentlemen walked together down the avenue; "Mrs. Connell, or one of her daughters? Poor Mrs. Raven is in a terrible position—one son hopelessly ill, the other scarcely escaped from the shadow of death, and a favourite companion likely to be arrested on a charge of murder."

He could not help thinking of Mrs. Raven's long, uneventful years of almost monotonous respectability. How far off those years seemed now!

But Mr. Connell shook his head.

"My eldest daughter, Louisa, is very ill," he answered; "very weak and ill, and her worst symptoms are nervous. Her mother cannot possibly leave her. In fact, we were just on the wing for the Continent, as change is all that the doctors can suggest for Louisa. Now this horrible story is opened up, I think I had better tell my wife to start off at once, and take our two little girls also with her. We had intended to leave them at home in the charge of our governess, Miss

Cleare. But the family had better be together now."

"Is Miss Cleare the young lady who first saw the ghost?" asked the Vicar. "I have heard all about that. Shall you take her, too, to the Continent with your family?"

"No," said Mr. Connell promptly, the old instincts of poverty making him remember the expense. Yet he reflected. "Indeed, I can hardly say. You see, all our plans will have to be re-arranged. Mrs. Connell must decide these things."

"Could not you get Miss Cleare to come here?" suggested Mr. Toynbee. "At these times it is always better to have those about us who are in some way associated with our general interests. Besides, Mr. Connell, Miss Cleare *might* be a witness."

"Sir, how much do you know?" asked the little minister.

They were already walking down the avenue, on their way to deliver the telegram.

"Nothing but what Frank told me," an-

swered Mr. Toynbee; "and that was only about this young lady seeing this thing they call a ghost. He said there was more to be told, and that you knew all, which, of course, quite satisfied me."

"There is a great deal more to be told, indeed," said Mr. Connell. "We had a fortune-teller down at Coltburn, and the beginning of the trouble was that some of the young people foolishly went to visit her. Then mysterious advertisements appeared in the paper. Then my wife and Miss Cleare saw in our garden a figure exactly resembling what Miss Cleare had seen in the fields here; and what has always struck me as oddest and most weird of all, at that very moment a fearful shriek rang through our house, which we never could account for. Then Frank, acting on the fortune-teller's instructions, sought in a vase in our drawing-room and found a sum of fifty pounds in gold, and also a written paper."

"Could that have been put there by this mysterious figure?" asked the Vicar. "Could

this ghost, or whatever it is, have gained access to your house ?"

" It could not have been put there on the occasion when that figure was seen," said Mr Connell. " For between that mystery and this finding, my wife had happened to examine carefully the contents of that vase."

The two old gentlemen stood still and faced each other.

" And what was on the written paper asked Mr. Toynbee.

" I expect that will have to come out now," said Mr. Connell. " But Frank charged me to keep the secret so sacredly, that as he is now likely to recover, I would rather not mention it till I have spoken again with him on the matter."

" Quite so, quite so," assented Mr. Toynbee, eager, as usual, to disclaim all wish to intrude on anybody's confidence. " But the fortune-teller must be found," he went on as emphatically as Mrs. Raven herself had done.

" My dear sir," said Mr. Connell, " to find

this woman has been the main object of the detectives from the outset. She has baffled them hitherto. Did Frank tell you anything about the mysterious delivery to him in her presence of the ring his father used to wear?"

"No," said Mr. Toynbee quickly; "but he mentioned that ring to me. He told me he had it: that it was safe. It was I who spoke about it first—about Leonard's having said he had lost it. You see all this points to a traitor within the Court."

"Well, well," said Mr. Connell, "but there must be a great deal more that we do not understand at all yet. I shall certainly take your advice, Mr. Toynbee, and get Miss Cleare to come here, if she will. She is a good little girl, who has passed through great trials herself, and knows how to respect sorrow and trouble."

They had reached the railway station, and the little minister went to a desk to compose his telegram. He was not going to grudge an extra fee, but he wanted every word to tell.

As he took the missive to the clerk, Mr. Connell noticed that Mr. Toynbee, who had left him in peace during its composition, had fallen into conversation with somebody.

This somebody was a tall, thin, elderly woman, and she was talking to the Vicar with the arid fluency of one going over a string of grievances which frequent recital has made familiar, but who, through some hope of redress, finds the present occasion worthy of special emphasis.

The Vicar turned towards Mr. Connell as he passed him, but did not speak till he came back towards him—his messages safely delivered.

"This is Miss Wilmot, our new post-mistress," he said, and the elderly woman gave a curious cross between the "bow" of her better days, and the "bob" which was the accredited sign of Ravenstoke respect. "Miss Wilmot is complaining very much of the accommodation of her post-office," the Vicar proceeded to explain, with one of those significant glances which suggest that

acquiescence is entreated for some matter which may not lie fully within the comprehension or the interest of one's auditor. "I promised to speak to your nephews about some alterations—but how can I, just now?"

"And every day I'm more afraid there'll be some accident," said Miss Wilmot. "It's quite a weight on my mind that something will happen; and the public may suffer, but I shall have to bear the blame. Maybe the gentleman doesn't know my place," she added, turning again specially to the Vicar, "but you do, sir, and you can bear witness that it's full of awkward corners, and with skirting-boards which have started that loose, that they might serve as bags for letters going nowhere!"

The Vicar drew Mr. Connell aside.

"She is a nervous, responsible sort of woman," he said, "and if any accident should happen to throw discredit on her, I should pity her very much. For the post-office is a disgrace to the village. The late Squire was always talking about getting it done up, but

the last post-people were very indolent, and never pressed the matter. Don't you think we might——" he suggested.

"Give her permission to repair it on our own responsibility," said the quick, practical little minister. "Yes, certainly."

"I am sure Frank would like it; and I expect it is Frank with whom the tenants will have to deal very soon," said the Vicar.

Mr. Connell answered nothing to that, for he had his own knowledge and his own thoughts upon that matter. But he let the phrase stand. It would serve the present occasion. And if he himself should have to pay for these repairs—well, they would not ruin him nowadays.

"Speak to the carpenter yourself, Miss Wilmot," Mr. Toynbee instructed the post-mistress. "Spur him on to work as fast as you can, and so get your mind at ease."

"Very many thanks, sir, I'm sure," she answered gratefully. "There's no reason why he shouldn't do something this very

night, for I'm sure it's the sooner the better."

"We at the Court must be prepared for another blow very soon," said the Vicar as they walked back. "I know Dr. Wragge's opinion of Leonard's state. His constitution will not long hold out. I do hope no constitutional taint has been transmitted to Frank. Mrs. Raven comes of a sickly race, but certainly Frank is not in the least like his mother."

Mr. Connell was reflective. This was an opportunity for an inquiry which he had always felt might be instituted with Mr. Toynbee.

"Frank was always a healthy child, I believe?" he said. "Did you know any of the other infants who died? You were here before Frank's birth."

"Oh yes," answered Mr. Toynbee; "and I baptized all the others, privately and in great haste—they died so soon—they were so clearly doomed. One died too soon even for that."

"What doctor attended the family in those days?" asked Mr. Connell.

"Dr. Wragge," said Mr. Toynbee; "this Dr. Wragge's father. The Wragges have attended the Ravens for two or three generations."

"And I suppose the doctor always introduced a nurse?" said Mr. Connell again.

"Yes; always," Mr. Toynbee readily replied. "Not always in time, though. I remember often thinking how odd it was that the only healthy baby of the brood came into the world with the least attendance and the least fuss, in a half-unexpected sort of way."

"What! was that Frank?" asked Mr. Connell, breathless.

"Yes," narrated the Vicar. "His birth was attended only by the old woman, Charity Hale—not quite so old then, of course, as she is now. I think that accounted for her having been always so fond of him, baby, boy, and man. A curious woman, Charity Hale. I'm specially disposed to respect an

old family servant, but I can't like this Charity. She's an embittered sort of soul. Perhaps she suffered in her sister's disgrace. It was her sister, you know, who was Eldred Sloam's mother—the woman who died a day or two before Squire Eldred, and whose death was said to have caused the fit of hard drinking in which he was thrown from his horse and killed."

"I suppose Charity Hale is greatly trusted at the Court?" observed Mr. Connell.

"Surely," said the Vicar. "She lives entirely in the life of the family."

"Does she take much interest in her unfortunate relative, Eldred Sloam?" asked the minister.

"No," said Mr. Toynbee; "she has always behaved to him as if she had some severe duty towards him that must perforce be performed. But she was certainly good to the poor lad who now lies dead yonder."

"That poor lad—James Sloam, I mean—must be considerably younger than Frank," ruminated Mr. Connell.

"Oh dear yes," answered the Vicar; "that poor fellow has scarcely reached sixteen. A short, sad life he has had, as did his mother before him. But I could never altogether pity her. Women have no right to fall in love with men of such a character as Eldred Sloam; and his character was well known to everybody after the story of Hester Walker."

"I suppose Charity Hale has few connections outside the Court?" said Mr. Connell.

"Old servants generally merge their lives in their masters', and drop their own people," returned Mr. Toynbee. "I don't think Charity ever had many relations, or 'followers' as the folk call them. I think the Hale girls were orphans—perhaps not very well brought up, poor things, and that may partly account for Salome's lapses from virtue. There was a third sister—younger—who I don't think ever came near the Court. Somebody told me that Charity had once boasted of this other sister as being an 'educated lady.'

What odd tricks our memories play us!" he added with a half-laugh. "When I have forgotten so much which I have striven hard to retain, why do I chance to remember the names of those three sisters Hale—only one of whom I ever saw—Salome, Charity, and Isabella? They tickled my fancy somehow. I wondered how their godfathers and godmothers had crossed the Rubicon between old-fashioned 'Bible names' and that of ballad and romance."

As the gentlemen entered the hall, Budd came forward to meet them. The doctor had been downstairs asking for them, he said. Their return was to be instantly notified to that gentleman. In alarm, they both at once asked after Frank. Budd answered that the doctor had said young Mr. Raven was all right now, but must be kept very quiet.

That good report was true enough. But there was another and more melancholy bulletin to be rendered. And Dr. Wragge's announcement was that Leonard had had

another convulsive seizure, without any return to consciousness, or apparent cause for agitation, and that he now seemed sinking fast, and might not survive the night.

The two elderly gentlemen clung together, as people always do when surrounded by troubles with which they cannot contend. Budd stirred up the fire for them in the big dining-room, and brought out bottles of good old wine. But though every now and then Mr. Toynbee and Mr. Connell tried to divert their conversation to affairs political or ecclesiastical, it would not do. An intense atmosphere of personal tragedy pervaded the place, and pressed upon them. And the only event of the evening was the arrival of Philip's answer to his father's telegram. It ran:

"Will be with you to-morrow morning. Miss Agate cannot leave her brother, but I bring E. A.'s nearest friend, also legal assistance."

CHAPTER XIII.

A LETTER FROM THE DEAD.

AFTER the fashion of people in times of trouble, Mr. Connell and Mr. Toynbee (who did not leave the Court) sat up far into the night. And as a consequence of this nocturnal watching, both the gentlemen were still in their rooms when Budd came knocking at their doors, to tell them that "Mr. Philip Connell and the people from London" had arrived. He also acquainted them with the present position of things. "Mr. Leonard is no better—is as bad as bad can be. But Mr. Frank is going on admirably, and the doctors say there's no more fear for him."

As for the visitors from London, concerning them, Budd reported that there was a gentleman with a black bag, whom he thought he had seen before. Then there was Mr. Philip himself, and "there was a poor-looking woman who was a-crying and seemed frightened, and Mrs. Sims was getting them all some tea."

The two gentlemen had expressed to each other the night before their wonder what Philip meant by the phrase of "her nearest friend," as referring to Evelyn Agate. But certainly they were not prepared for what Philip whispered to them, as with a slight gesture he indicated his companion.

"This is Evelyn Agate's mother. This new mystery has already unravelled an old one."

Still they were not so surprised as Frank would have been, had he been on the scene; for neither of them recognised the shabby, tearful woman standing in the background as he would have done.

"For more than twenty years this person

has acted as Miss Agate's servant," Philip whispered. "We have all known her only by the name of Mary Davies."

"And her real name is——" interrupted Mr. Toynbee in his eagerness.

"Is Hester Walker," Philip answered. "She was once in service near here, and disappeared suddenly. Is it possible you remember the story?"

"Perfectly," said the Vicar. "Mr. Connell can bear witness that I had already discovered a likeness between the lost Hester Walker and this unfortunate Miss Evelyn, though there is not much now," he said, with a pitying glance at the scared suffering face.

Mary Davies saw and understood that look. She had known Mr. Toynbee, the Vicar, of old. She stepped forward, crying:

"Oh, sir, save my girl! she can't be guilty. Some bad people must have got hold of her as they got hold of me. I don't say she mayn't have done wrong—so did I—it's only when we do wrong that tempters can seize us and drag us farther down. But save

her! save her! Oh, sir, such a little help might have saved me!"

In her eager importunity, the unhappy woman had put her trembling hands on the Vicar's arm. He looked kindly into the convulsed, imploring face. He remembered Hester Walker, and he knew Evelyn Agate. There were far different elements at work in the two—elements which would make their respective temptations absolutely incomprehensible to each other. But he could not say this now, so he only said, consolingly:

"Your daughter shall have the utmost help and justice. Fear nothing on that score, poor soul!"

"But Mrs. Davies has a story to tell which may explain a great deal to us," observed Philip, drawing up chairs round the table. "And we might as well invite in the solicitor I have brought down, before we begin our conversation. There is no harm in his hearing the facts over again. Re-statement often brings out something new. Budd, go and ask Mr. Dewe to step this way.

Mr. Dewe," he explained, in an aside to his father and Mr. Toynbee, "is now employed by Miss Agate's wish, and it appears now that it is not the first time he has been at Raven Court. But I must tell you all about that afterwards. A thoroughly respectable gentleman is Mr. Dewe. Dewe and Creed are one of the first legal firms. This sort of work is not in their usual line."

Mr. Dewe came in. He bowed affably all round, and took a seat beside Philip. The Vicar had been talking in a low tone to Mary Davies.

"I can guess Sloam was harsh and cruel to you, poor woman," he said.

"Aye, sir," she answered. "There seemed nobody to turn to in my shame and trouble. An' there came always this woman tempting me—saying she would take my baby and get it a good home, and leave me free for honest work. I did what I did for the child's sake."

"But what about this woman?" asked the Vicar. "Who was she? You say she came to you. Where did you first see her?"

"I never knew who she was, sir. I saw her first in Ash Lane," said the poor creature. "She met me there when I was waiting to see Eldred, and she called me into a little shed that stands there, and told me she knew what trouble I was in."

"And you did not know her?"

"No, sir, no. I never heard her name. She wasn't young: she must have been over forty—a tall woman, dark, and well-dressed."

Philip touched his father's foot under the table. Evidently he wanted to emphasize this description.

"She gave me money, sir, and bade me go to London to an address she gave me. I wasn't to mention her to the people of the house; but she said she was sure to know directly my baby was born, and she would come at once and take it away. She gave me plenty of money. God forgive me, sir, for a wicked woman, but the fancy would keep running in my head that as the lady of the Court was expecting too, and had such sickly

babies, mine might be meant to get into the place of hers!"

They were all listening with intense interest.

"But oh, those dreadful days!" wailed poor Mary, "when my little girl was born, and the woman never kept her promise, nor came nigh me!"

"But she did come, after all," suggested the Vicar soothingly.

"Aye," said Mary, choking back her sobs, "she did come. And she got the child. She did not speak so gracious-like this time. And she bade me go and lodge in a little coffee-house—and I wasn't to mention her there, either. But she knew the kind of folk that kept it, she said; and if I showed myself a decent woman, they'd get me honest work among their neighbours—and so they did. I did odd jobs for a while, and then I settled down with Miss Gertrude Agate—bless her!"

"And you heard about the calamity in that house, didn't you?" said Philip.

"Aye, sir; I knew a baby had been taken

from their house too, only all against their will. But when I opened the door one morning and saw the little queen on the step, I knew it was mine that minute! It came over me at once, like, you see, sir; and when I took her up there was a dear little mole on her neck, that I could have sworn to anywhere. I reckon whoever put her there wanted me to know she was mine, for they had pinned on her clothes the date of her birth, to give me a hint who she was."

"And you kept your secret from Miss Agate?" asked Mr. Connell.

There was a shade of reproach either in his words or his tone, or at least Mary Davies felt it so, for she burst into tears.

"I know I've been a wicked woman," she cried. "I've lived a long lie with the best, most patient angel that breathes in this world. But oh, sir, it was hard on me! I'd found out, well enough, what the world has to say to a woman that doesn't tell where she's come from, even if she has not a baby with her. An' there was Miss Agate

a-crying and a-laughing over the baby, and saying to it, 'that she might hope her nephew would get the same measure she'd give it.' Was I to drag it out into misery? I know I should—but I didn't—and Miss Agate, she knows now, sir, and she forgives me, sir. She never said one bitter word when it all came out last night. Only she said to Mr. Connell, 'Spare nothing to get Evelyn justice first, and then mercy.'"

"God help thee, poor soul!" said Mr. Connell. And the Vicar was wiping his eyes.

"I've been punished," plained poor Mary; "punished sad and sore. Couldn't I always see how my darling child despised poor low people like me? And she got to hear some'at of one Eldred Sloam from Mr. Raven, and she would talk about him. And then there came the horrid letters telling Miss Agate that there would be mischief if my Evelyn stayed on here. Oh, if the mistress had only heeded me then! But Miss Gertrude would have listened if she'd known what good right I had to speak."

The gentlemen conferred together.

"One cannot help fancying that there may be something in this poor creature's early conjecture that her babe was wanted to be a changeling at the Court," said Mr. Connell. "This puts us on the track of suspicions already awakened, Philip."

"It does more than that," answered the young man; "for I have more facts than you know yet. I have found out that Mrs. Raven did not meet with Evelyn so entirely in the common way of advertisement as we think. Mr. Dewe there will tell you of incidents preceding that advertisement; incidents which led up to Mrs. Raven sitting in ambush in his office and getting a sight of Evelyn Agate without the girl's knowledge. These incidents, coupled with all we know, incline me to the belief that there was some dark work on that fourth of September, twenty-two years ago; and what is more, that *Mrs. Raven knows it.* I should have thought that it might be but some plot that was never carried out, but for some recent

actions of Mrs. Raven's, which show her ill at ease with things as they exist. Who could give us any particulars of the time when Frank was born ?"

"We were talking over that last night," said Mr. Connell. "Mr. Toynbee says that at Frank's birth there was nobody with Mrs. Raven but Charity Hale."

"Could Charity Hale have been the woman who visited Hester Walker?" inquired Philip.

"Charity Hale is short, and she limps," said the Vicar. "But what does all this mean ? What do you suspect next ?"

"That Frank may not be the real child of the Squire and his wife," whispered Philip. "That was what the fortune-teller told him at Coltburn."

"God bless my soul!" said the Vicar in sheer dismay.

"Had this servant-woman Hale any near relative—any confidante whom she might safely employ ?" asked Mr. Dewe in clear business tones. "For it is possible we shall find some other person with a strong

motive for removing this young gentleman, Mr. Frank Raven, out of the way."

The Vicar threw up his hands in dismay.

"Charity Hale had no friends—scarcely any acquaintances," he said. "Her sister Salome was long since dead, and her sister Isabella never came to Ravenscourt."

"She had a sister Isabella, then?—'Isabella Hale,'" said the lawyer.

He wrote the name down on a piece of blotting-paper which lay before him. The pen he used was a quill which had once seen hard usage in the service of the frugal Leonard. The lawyer's handwriting was rather bold and large. He went on automatically making flourishes on the sheet.

"Can Frank be the Agates' lost nephew?" whispered Philip to his father. "But what object could anybody have had in grafting the Agate child upon the Raven stem? Yet if we could believe this, much else becomes plain. One can then understand the wish to terrify Frank, by the insecurity of his position, into marrying this Miss Evelyn, who

has some remote connection both with Ravens and Hales, and from whose future good offices the latter might expect something."

Old Mr. Connell blushed like a girl at this abrupt betrayal of poor Frank's honourably-guarded secret.

"How do you know that—that—any such thing was proposed to Frank?" he asked. "I'm sure Frank has never told you so."

Philip laughed lightly.

"I gathered it," he said, "and I got proof positive on that night when he showed you the paper he found in the blue-rimmed vase with the hidden gold. You held that behind the candle to read it, and I saw the chief words of the message backwards—thus!" and he caught up the sheet of blotting-paper and held it between himself and the window.

At this moment Budd advanced into the room, bearing a letter on a salver. The old servant's face was pale and solemn.

"I'm bidden to give that to you, sir," he said, in awe-struck tones, advancing towards Mr. Connell.

The letter was clean, but old-looking, and it bore a postage-stamp, though it was guiltless of post-marks. It was addressed to Frank Raven, Esq., Berton College, Camford.

Mr. Connell and the Vicar looked at it together. And then they looked at each other—and then they looked at Budd.

"I've seen writing imitating this handwriting lately," whispered Mr. Connell.

"But this *is* really the late Squire's," said the Vicar positively. "I'm sure of it. Where does it come from, Budd?"

The lawyer put up his eyeglass, and looked at the three old men standing riveted round an ordinary-looking letter — grown awful because in their eyes it was, in very truth, a letter from the dead!

As for Philip, he was so strangely absorbed in the blotting-paper that he noticed nothing; but suddenly turned about, and broke the hush that had fallen on the room, by exclaiming:

"We have got her! They are one and the same!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE NAME ON THE BLOTTING-PAPER.

"O PHILIP!" said Mr. Connell, waving away the paper his son pressed upon him. "Wait a minute. Don't tell me anything else yet. This is a letter written by my poor brother-in-law to Frank while he was at college—and it seems never to have been delivered."

Philip was instantly attentive. Not that he imagined his own discovery was the less urgently important of the two. But he knew of Frank's great love for the Squire, his father, and of all the mystery which had clung about the Squire's will.

"Where did this come from?" Philip

asked, taking the letter from Mr. Toynbee's hand.

"The post-mistress brought it up herself," Budd answered in a solemn undertone. "It was found inside the skirting-board in her shop, when the alterations were begun there. There is no mistake that the letter is in the master's handwriting," volunteered Budd with feeling. "I believe it was the very last letter I ever carried for him. I'm nigh sure it's the one I took to the post only the night before me and Mrs. Sims were asked to witness the will."

"One does not know what may be inside it," mused the Vicar; "but I suppose Frank must be allowed to see it as soon as possible?"

"As possible—yes," said Mr. Connell; "but the doctors say, that though his danger from the poison is quite over, he is still very weak, and any serious shock might disturb his progress. And I cannot see that this letter is at all likely to contain anything bearing on the present crisis of affairs."

"Probably not," decided Philip; "but the discovery that was so absorbing me when the letter came in most distinctly does bear on the present. We have but just begun to feel an interest in the existence and fate of this third sister of the Hale family—the scarcely known Isabella Hale; and for a long time we have been sedulously seeking to trace Madame Allebasi Elah, the 'Oriental Mystery.' Look here!"

Once more he held up the blotting-paper between the window and the group. The lawyer pressed forward as eagerly as anybody, for what was there on that paper but his own handwriting—the name of Isabella Hale? He had jotted it down in upright letters, standing singly, and mostly of a modified form of capital. But now Philip held the paper so that the writing showed through it, and therefore could be read backwards. They could all see the words "e l a H a l l e b a s I." And thus the secret stood suddenly revealed.

The lawyer drew a fresh sheet of paper in

front of him, and dipped his pen in the ink. "Let us make a note of the various relationships this discovery involves," he said, with business-like crispness; "these may lead us on a little farther still."

Philip drew up his chair opposite, and began his recital.

"This Madame Elah, or Isabella Hale, is sister to Mrs. Charity Hale, still a trusted resident in this house, and also sister to one Salome Hale—mother of the man Eldred Sloam, who is by repute the son of Squire Eldred Raven, the bachelor uncle of the late Squire. I am right, so far?" he appealed to the Vicar.

"Quite right," assented Mr. Toynbee.

"This Madame Elah, then," Philip went on, "is aunt to Eldred Sloam, and great-aunt to any child he may have, wherever and whoever it may be."

"Has this man Eldred Sloam any brothers or sisters?" asked the lawyer, looking from one to another. "Did Salome Hale have any child beside him?"

Philip turned to his father. Mr. Connell, in his turn, looked towards the Vicar, who shook his head dubiously. Budd, still lurking in the background, gave a little timid cough.

"Begging pardon, gentlemen," he said, "I have heard there was another baby—born when the mother, Salome Hale, died. I've heard Mrs. Sims say so. I've heard her say she'd like to know what became of it. It was taken away somewhere among its mother's folk, and Mrs. Charity has never named it since."

The lawyer was again busily writing.

"Mrs. Charity must be asked about that," said he.

"If that child were living," remarked Philip, "it would be a grown-up man or woman by this time—scarcely younger than Eldred Sloam."

"You see these inquiries are of great importance to the whole matter," explained Mr. Dewe. "The question now is, if Mr. Frank Raven is not the child of his reputed parents,

where did he come from? Circumstances point to the child stolen from the Agate household. But from what motives could that child have been selected?"

"Frank has Raven blood—of that I am quite positive," said the Vicar, leaning back in his chair.

"So I told him, when he first began to doubt his position," chimed in Mr. Connell.

"Why, he is the most genuine Raven the Court has had in it for a long time," the Vicar went on. "Except in a few general family traits, he is not like the late Squire. Nor is he like his brother Leonard, because his brother has no Raven characteristics at all. But if you had asked me to show you a typical Raven, I should have pointed to Frank—the curling chestnut hair, the full nostril, the strong chin, the firm set of the head are all there. He must be a Raven," he concluded.

"Family pedigree and family blood do not always go together," said the lawyer quietly. "But I have on hand certain information

which may help us at this very point. I happen to know—you, sir, know how," he added, turning to Philip; "for indeed I may say that we happen to know from Miss Gertrude Agate herself—that the wife of her brother Theodore, the mother of the stolen baby boy, was herself a foundling, with absolutely no clue to her own parentage. Is it possible that she may be this vanished baby of Salome Hale's?"

"Is this Mrs. Theodore Agate dead?" asked the Vicar.

"She is dead," said the lawyer; adding briefly, "the loss of her infant killed her, as it upset for a time the mind of her husband, Theodore Agate."

"I remember something of the famous child-stealing story," said Mr. Toynbee. While Mr. Connell inwardly repeated to himself, "Theodore? Theodore? Where have I heard that name lately? I should say I had heard it since I came here."

"It seems to me," resumed Philip, "that the first thing we have to do is to see

Mrs. Charity Hale, and put our questions to her."

"I agree with you," assented Mr. Dewe, taking a fresh sheet.

"We must speak with her first, certainly, because I have taken no measures to secure her safe remaining. But will you send the servant out of the room, please?" he asked suddenly.

Budd did not need to be sent, he begged pardon humbly and went. The lawyer resumed.

"I may as well tell you, gentlemen, painful though it is to do so to the relatives and old friends of the family, that I have instructed Nurse Hannah to keep Mrs. Raven under surveillance. Facts which I know, and which I have already communicated to Mr. Philip Connell, justify my doing this in the interests of my clients, the Agates. As her presence must be required in the sick-chamber of her son, she need feel no unpleasantness."

"It is hard to hear these things, but they must be borne," said Mr. Connell.

"May I trust you to feel no surprise at anything you learn during my interview with Mrs. Hale?" the lawyer went on. "Strictly speaking, that interview should be private."

"We quite understand," said Mr. Connell, with his old-fashioned courtesy. "There is no hostile animus on our side—quite the contrary."

He rang the bell. It was answered not by Budd, but by a female servant.

"Will you tell Mrs. Hale to come here immediately?" requested the minister.

Charity obeyed the summons quite readily. She was beginning to think that with Hester Walker (for she recognised her instantly under the guise of Mary Davies) and Mr. Dewe (of whose early interviews with Mrs. Raven she was perfectly well-informed) both in the Court, it was high time for herself to speak out.

Everybody turned towards Charity as she obeyed the summons, looking the very model of the old-fashioned servant, wearing almost ostentatiously every badge of servitude—cap,

kerchief, apron, and short full skirt; she curtsied, too.

The Vicar's indifference and antipathy to her suddenly developed into full consciousness of itself. Good heavens! had the conventional virtues of her position half-blinded him to the fact that her eyes were crafty eyes, and that her lips were cruel?

As Charity sat down she looked around, and the expression of her face suddenly changed. She saw that the fateful hour had come. But it was no look of fear or shrinking which came upon her countenance—rather of eager acceptance of the moment.

It was the lawyer, Mr. Dewe, who broke silence.

"Mrs. Hale," he said, "we are obliged to ask about a great many things just now. You must not object to answer a few questions; and you must answer all, however unimportant they may seem to you, as carefully as possible. If your memory fails you, say so. Now, I understand you had a sister named Isabella Hale. Is she still living?"

"She is, sir," said Charity, quite coolly.

"Has she never been married?"

"No, sir."

"You had another sister, once?"

"Yes, sir," answered Charity. "My sister Salome, who died!"

"You must pardon me mentioning these things," said Mr. Dewe, "but do you recognise any relationship between yourself and the man Eldred Sloam?"

Charity hesitated for a second.

"He's no more related to me than he is to the family at the Court," she said drily.

"Well, then, to go back to your sister Isabella. She is living? Does she live near here?"

"She moves about a great deal, sir."

"Do you see much of her?"

"I see her when she is near here."

"Did you know a girl named Hester Walker here some two-and-twenty years ago? Try to remember."

"There's no need, sir. I remember her—a creature that got into trouble," said

Charity, knowing quite well that the said Hester Walker sat before her in the person of Mary Davies.

"That is true. Did your sister Isabella know this Hester Walker?"

"How do you expect me to know that, sir?" asked the old woman shrewdly. "You can't expect me to know what or who my sister knows."

"Never mind—as a matter of fact, did she know her?"

"I never saw them together, sir."

"Did not your sister Isabella take charge of that unhappy girl's baby?"

"Possibly, sir," said Charity; "very probably."

"Do you know what reason she had for interesting herself in Hester Walker? Was it not because the father of that child was Eldred Sloam?"

"Very likely," returned Charity.

"And Eldred Sloam himself is the child of your other sister Salome Hale? Do you know that that baby daughter of Eldred

Sloam and Hester Walker has been brought back to Ravenstoke in the person of Evelyn Agate?"

"And who brought her?" cried Charity. "Did I bring her? Did my sister Isabella bring her? Did she come of her own accord? Where is the lady who put advertisements into the papers, and got a sight of the girl on the sly? You see I can ask questions in my turn. I know all you know, sir—and more. Didn't my lady know that Master Frank isn't her own child?"

"Hold—hold, woman!" cried Mr. Connell. "If that babe of Mrs. Raven's was changed at its very birth, how could the unhappy mother know of it?"

Because he had never liked or trusted Mrs. Raven, Mr. Connell felt he must the more zealously defend her from this cruel calumny.

"Be calm, sir," pleaded the lawyer. "Mrs. Hale, you are making admissions most damaging to yourself. If you wish what you say to be taken in the light of a confession, so be it. If you know that Mr.

Frank Raven is not what he believes he is——'

Charity laughed scornfully. But the lawyer went on calmly:

"Then you may be called upon to state what you know of where he did come from, and who placed him in this false position."

"And I," said Charity, with malicious triumph, "might be able to show that it is no false position at all—or, at any rate, won't be when Mr. Leonard is gone."

Now they all knew that Leonard's life was doomed, yet her calm anticipation of his decease made them shiver.

"Mrs. Hale," said the lawyer, looking steadily at her, "had your sister Salome any other child beside Eldred?"

"Yes, she had," said Charity, with triumphant emphasis.

Philip and Mr. Dewe studiously avoided any exchange of glances.

"When was that child born?" was the next inquiry.

"When Salome died," said Charity briefly.

"What became of it?" asked Mr. Dewe.

"Nobody ever asked me that before," Charity replied bitterly. "That was nobody's business, then."

"Never mind that now," said the lawyer, "but answer my question."

But Mr. Connell, his keen sense of justice touched by the old woman's hard natural logic, said soothingly:

"Perhaps you did your duty better than others did."

"Isabella and I were young then," said Charity Hale, seemingly a little softened. "Leastways, Isabella was. Squire Eldred was dead in the same week as Salome, and the late Squire was a minor, and his guardians wouldn't have a word to say about the baby. Isabella took charge of it. She was working in a milliner's shop in London at the time, and—— There! I'm not going into Isabella's business."

"You must tell us where she is, that she herself may give us the information," said Philip Connell.

"That I don't know," answered Charity, with an air of entire candour. "I never know where Isabella is. But she is never far off when there's anything going forward at the Court."

"Did she not pass by the name of Madame Elah, and act sometimes as a fortnne-teller?" asked Philip, with an affectation of indifference.

"Isabella's ways have never been my ways," answered Charity evasively.

"You own your sister Salome had this second child," said Mr. Dewe. "Do you know whether it is still living?"

"It is not," replied Charity briefly.

"Has it been long dead?"

"Yes, for years," she answered impatiently.

"Was it a boy or a girl?" inquired the lawyer.

"A girl," said Charity.

"Then it is dead now? We are to regard its history as closed?" said Mr. Dewe tentatively.

Charity smiled cunningly.

"That's as you please, sir," she answered. "People may be dead, yet may have lived long enough to have left children behind them."

"You mean that this child of your sister Salome's left a descendant. Such descendant of course is in the same relation—or no relation, as you please—to you and the Raven family as this unfortunate girl Evelyn Agate——"

"Gently, sir," said Charity, trembling with eldritch glee. "Maybe this child is related to us all, the Court people and me too, sir. There's wonderful magic in a certain bit of paper, sir. It may be a marriage certificate!"

Everybody was listening with strained attention.

"You must not waste our time," said Mr. Dewe severely.

Charity laughed.

"Don't let anybody talk about Mr. Frank's false position till they've seen whether it is false," she said.

"Charity Hale," said Mr. Toynbee solemnly, "a matter of life and death is hanging over our heads. Can you not help us to find your sister? Think of this unhappy girl lying under this suspicion——"

"Have mercy, as you hope for it in your turn," wailed Mary Davies.

"I don't hope for mercy, poor silly creature," said Charity. "The most I've learned to hope for is to get my rights when it's folks' interest to give them. I don't want to harm this poor girl—though I never liked her. I can't see that there is much more reason to suspect her than other people I could name. But you gentry will stand by each other."

"Mrs. Hale," said the lawyer in his calmest tones, "the only inference that I can draw from your observations is that you believe, or wish us to believe, that this younger and last child of your sister Salome's was born in wedlock?"

"That's so," answered Charity with some excitement. "I've got the marriage-lines

between Salome Hale and Eldred Raven. Salome was a good sort of a girl enough; yes, she was, though she was flighty, and misfortune did overtake her, aye, and nearly killed her; and she ran away after the boy Eldred was born, to escape the Squire Eldred and to hide her head; and the Squire went after her and found her in London, and they were married at once. But it pleased the Squire to keep the marriage secret, and she did the like at his wish. Yes, the Squire repaired the damage as well as it could be repaired; but it couldn't undo it. I hated Squire Eldred, and I hate him now," she added vindictively.

"Hush, hush!" said Mr. Toynbee; "he is dead. And did you care much for the woe which befell Hester Walker?"

"I think we cared more than anyone else did," Charity rejoined sullenly.

"Mrs. Hale," said Philip, "do you know who or what passed lately in this neighbourhood as the ghost of Squire Eldred? Of course, you know of the report of the figure seen in the fields?"

"Aye," said Charity. "I've known all these years that Eldred Sloam, sore with being cut off from what he half feels ought to be his rights, has covered many a wicked way with the semblance of the dead Squire. It was an excellent semblance to hide in," she added bitterly, "for Squire Eldred living had not been so loved that any would care to encounter Squire Eldred dead. Once put an idea into people's heads, and they'll make ghosts out of gate-posts," she concluded with her accustomed cynicism.

"Then do you know who are the figures seen only lately," pursued Philip, "the young man and the woman whom popular fancy was speedily turning into your sister Salome?"

"Sir," said Charity earnestly, "Sir, I want to know that as much as you can. It's my belief that Isabella knows; and I've a notion that whoever they be, they are not to her mind, and their walking is none of her plan. It's my belief that Eldred, too, knows more than he says about them. That time

when he was hurt, it's my opinion it was more than a fright he got. I think it was a blow."

"Did you ever see Eldred himself in his ghostly disguise?" asked Philip.

"Only once," Charity answered. "That was the night before Mr. Frank went to London. Eldred brought me a letter from my sister Isabella that night. It was the first time I had heard direct from her for years. For we had quarrelled over the use we should make of those marriage-lines of Salome's. Isabella and I never did agree very well."

Philip Connell wrote something on a slip of paper, and passed it round to his father. Mr. Connell read it silently, and sent it on to the Vicar. It ran:

"Then that letter was carried on the night when Miss Cleare saw the figure in the lane before she met Frank."

"And now, Mrs. Hale," said Philip, "can you tell us whether you have the slightest guess concerning these two figures? Is there

anybody whom you suspect of being either the man or the woman ?"

Charity shook her head, but admitted:

"I've sometimes fancied the woman might be Miss Evelyn."

"And the man—who ?"

"I've not the least idea," she declared.

"But, Mrs. Hale," said the lawyer, "since you knew of Squire Eldred's tardy marriage with your sister Salome, why did you not at once put in the legal claim of her younger child ?"

"We did not know it then," answered Charity, who on these points seemed anxious to give all information. "My sister Isabella came across the marriage-lines in the City church, quite accidentally. But that was years and years after Salome's death. It was only just before Master Frank was born."

"You are leaving us to infer that Mr. Frank Raven is the son of your sister Salome's youngest child," said the lawyer. "Is that so, according to your belief ?"

"Yes. He is the son of Mrs. Agate.

Isabella had a good friend in London, a wealthy lady who was childless. She contrived to get this lady to adopt poor Salome's baby, who passed by the name of Marian Snow. This lady educated the child well, and when she grew up she married Theodore Agate."

"Then, when you at last got to know that Salome was married, why did you not declare it for Mrs. Agate's sake—for right's sake?" asked Mr. Connell.

"I've seen nothing," said Charity, "to make me think that right is might. What were we two sisters?—I and Isabella—a poor servant and a strolling conjuror. Salome's child was a girl—we wasn't sure whether that mightn't go against her. I stood out for waiting. You need not hurry to cut down sound timber—it keeps on growing. At that very time we found out the marriage. There was a baby expected at the Court; and there was that poor simpleton, Hester Walker, in disgrace; and there was Salome's daughter, Mrs. Agate, looking for her own

confinement. It was something Mrs. Raven herself said which put our next move into our heads. She knew it did. What she said was: 'Oh for a living and healthy babe, which my husband would think was mine!' She never thought from the first that Master Frank was her own child—I am sure of that. I said to Isabella, said I, 'If we get our own in among the gentry like one of themselves, when it's grown up, then will be the time for us to make our claim.' And Isabella saw there was something in that. And yet we two quarrelled. She would have been hasty. I didn't hear from her for years till that night before Master Frank's going to London."

"And what was her communication then?" asked Mr. Dewe.

"She wrote that now the late Squire was dead, Mrs. Raven would be doing some underhand work again, and I must keep my eyes and ears open. And sure enough, the very next day there was that advertisement in the newspaper, and I took care Master Frank should see that paper. I expect my sister

Isabella had always her eye on the Court, and knew more what was going on here than most of us; and, after we once came together again, I helped her all I could—it was only natural!"

"Isabella is wrong sometimes, though," Charity went on. "I always told her she was wrong in fancying Master Frank knew he was a changeling, but meant to stick on quietly if he could. I know him better than that, you see. Isabella always upheld that Miss Evelyn took after our side, the Hales, except in the hair. And when Mrs. Raven opened up a way, Isabella thought she'd do her best for Evelyn. She said it didn't seem fair that a bit of paper should make such a differ between cousins. So Isabella carried on her tricks—which I didn't hold with—specially after seeing the girl. I shouldn't have liked to see her mistress of the Court. Isabella had set her heart on Master Frank marrying Miss Evelyn."

She paused there.

"Mrs. Hale," said Philip Connell, in his

low confidential tone. "Did you ever, from some place in this house, remove a red intaglio ring?"

Charity's face flushed, and then paled into positive lividness.

"I took Squire Eldred's ring that my sister might give it to his grandson," she said. "I'd grudged seeing it on the late Squire's hand, though I loved him. Yes, I did. And Mr. Leonard was not going to wear it. He seemed to know by nature that it wasn't his right."

Mr. Connell was whispering explanations to the Vicar, already somewhat prepared for these revelations by his conversations with Leonard and Frank.

"Well, Mrs. Hale," said Mr. Dewe. "I don't think we need detain you longer now. Of course, you will understand that all you have said to-day may have to be repeated again in some more formal manner. And you must also understand that you are not at liberty to leave this house. Your evidence will be required at the inquest to-morrow."

"You needn't be afraid of my going away, sir," said Charity, rising. "I've waited years for this day. And if you haven't done so already, maybe you had better tell somebody to keep an eye on Eldred Sloam's cottage, and whoever comes and goes there."

She turned at the door, and curtsied as she left the room. It was an obeisance in which she managed most adroitly to turn her back on Mary Davies—the much-despised "Hester Walker."

"That's an awful woman," said the Vicar, with a sigh of relief. "Do you really believe she doesn't know where her sister is?"

"I think it is very likely to be true," answered the lawyer. "These people use these secrecies even among each other as a sort of general safeguard. But I expect Isabella Hale will soon appear upon the scene. Certainly this story gives neither of these sisters any interest in Frank's death. Quite the reverse. But we have not yet fathomed all the mystery of the ghosts, nor of the relations existing between whoever this

mysterious stranger may be and my unhappy client."

"Hist!" said Philip; "there is one thing we have quite forgotten to inquire about. It occurred to me two or three times, and then slipped from my mind again. If Frank is the child of Mr. and Mrs. Agate, and Evelyn the child of Eldred Sloam and Mary Davies, then what became of the baby that was really expected at the Court? Suppose it to be living still!"

"In any case, if Frank's present claim is established, it cannot interfere with him," said the Vicar. "He has the prior right."

"Then if it be living, there is one person directly interested in Frank's death," admitted Mr. Dewe. "So the first question we must get answered is as to the identity of this mysterious ghost—a young man, too, we are told. I understand you have already telegraphed to the young lady who saw Eldred Sloam masquerading on the night when Mrs. Hale admits that he visited her with a message from her sister?"

"Yes," said the elder Mr. Connell; "I hope Miss Cleare will be here this afternoon."

"Well," remarked Mr. Dewe, gathering his papers together, "I thank you for the help you have given me. I won't accept the hospitality of the Court. I must see my unhappy client at once, and after that I will go to the White Hart, where it will be more seemly for me to interview anybody from whom I may have to seek information."

"I suppose we must have legal advice too," observed the Vicar, looking round.

"I have taken care of that," said Philip. "Before I left London I sent word to the family solicitor—Mr. Brackenbury, you know—to be here as soon as possible. He will probably arrive by the same train as Miss Cleare. The London and Coltburn trains meet at the junction."

"I am sure to see Cran immediately," said the lawyer, standing ready to take leave. "It is odd how this woman Elah or Hale has evaded him. Now he knows the two are identical, he may be more fortunate. Good-

day for the present, gentlemen. I should advise that the late Squire's letter to his son Frank, which has so strangely turned up to-day, should be shown to the young gentleman as soon as possible--not of course without the utmost precautions against any shock. But my own wide experience is, that in endeavouring to avoid shocks we may induce delays and dangers, which end in producing worse shocks, not to be avoided or even softened."

He opened the door as he spoke. There was a slight hesitancy in his doing so. On the outside somebody else, at that very instant, was turning the handle the other way. It was Budd, who did not stand back for the lawyer's egress. There was that in his face which made the lawyer stand back for him.

"Mr. Leonard is just gone, sir!" he said solemnly, addressing the Vicar, who seemed to the worthy old man the sole representative of order and authority now remaining. "He went off easily—in a sleep—they could hardly tell when all was over. They have not taken Mrs. Raven from his room yet."

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE FIRELIGHT.

IT is a strange experience when the presence of death and the hush surrounding it is welcomed rather as relief and rest. But it was so at Ravens court that day. Bewilderment and dismay might pause a while, and give place to those calm and tender feelings of regret and compunction, without which—God be thanked for the secret softness He has dropped into humanity—even the least lovable of us can scarcely depart to our long rest.

They took the poor mother to her own apartments. She had bent down and kissed the cold cheek of her eldest-born, scarcely

less responsive now than it had often been in the days of health and life. Then she submitted to the guidance of her attendants, and followed where they led her.

Only she turned aside from the tender ministrations of Janet Mackay, and shook her head when Nurse Hannah asked whether she would see the Vicar, or her brother-in-law, or his son. They could not let her see Frank just yet, Nurse Hannah said gently. He was sleeping a long, sound sleep.

So she sat in her great armchair in front of her wide cheery fire; her thin hands folded in her lap, her figure shrinking together, a look of age and feebleness seeming to steal over her. Janet Mackay and Nurse Hannah kept aside, the former weeping.

So hours went by. There were subdued sounds of coming and going in the house below. And once and again Nurse Hannah assured herself that her remaining patient was still sleeping peacefully, with a hue of health stealing back upon his face. And kindly hands of old dependents spread Leonard's

death-chamber with snowy drapery, while good Budd stripped the scant blossoms from the wintry green-house to strew them over his dead master; and, as he went about his pathetic task, he said to himself, "Thank God that it is not for Master Frank I am doing this!"

Frank awoke with a strange sense of entire refreshment and restoration. A cold sunbeam played across the apartment, bringing out the rich colours of an old Worcester vase, the only ornament it boasted; but the whole familiar room seemed to smile a welcome on the owner, who had so nearly left it for ever. It was a moment's space before Frank's mind regained full consciousness of all that had lately happened. But when it came, the recollection was very vivid. And how still the house was—how strangely still! And Leonard! And then Frank knew Leonard was dead—knew it, he knew not how; but with a knowledge as sure as if he had just seen Leonard's departed spirit in that mysterious kingdom of sleep from which he had just returned.

Silently and swiftly he arose and dressed. The bands of bodily weakness were certainly still clinging around him, but his renewed energies sufficed to throw them off. He felt his feet falter in their tread, and his hands tremble in their action, and he realized that he had been very near those gates of death, towards which his hot and embittered young heart had sometimes yearned impatiently during his earlier stay in London. But now he thanked God that he was spared to live on. Perhaps there was a figure in the foreground of his existence which endeared its possession. Earth is not much unlike heaven, when we find an angel dwelling here!

He opened his door gently, and peeped out. Nobody was astir in the corridor; but by a light thrown across its shadowy length, he knew a door was open—the door of Leonard's room.

He went towards it. He felt quite sure of what he should find. There was nobody there but the poor maid-servant whose heart was half-broken for the death of poor James

Sloam. She was helping Budd with the flowers, and he had gone back to the greenhouse for more. She was crying heartily and unrestrainedly—her sad task, and the presence of her master's corpse, excusing her, almost to herself. Demonstrations of public sorrow are often the hoarded expression of silent and nameless woes. Nobody would wonder at her grief over the gentleman who had scarcely known of her existence; but much sorrow for her daily companion, James Sloam, would have certainly called forth unsympathetic and critical comment.

She did not notice Frank, peering through the half-opened door. He saw her pick the loveliest white flower from the basket, and hastily hide it behind the folds of a curtain. That was for James's coffin. Frank would only wonder vaguely at the action. He would not go into the room: he would not disturb her. He went downstairs. There was nobody astir—nobody even in sight, except a strange man, seated in Budd's hall-chair, who looked at him with interest and curiosity but did not

speak. Frank hesitated. He could not go to the luncheon-room; a shrinking horror seized him at the thought. And Leonard had sat so much in the dining-room that it would seem terribly empty now. Chance callers on business might be in the library, he would not go there. He made his way to the great dismal drawing-room. He threw open the door. A strange atmosphere of warmth and brightness met him. A huge fire was burning on the hearth. A solitaire tea set, recently used, stood on an occasional table. For there was somebody in the apartment—somebody seated in the great easy-chair, and so swallowed up in its soft depths, that as he came up behind he could see nothing but the simple folds of a black dress. As his foot fell noiselessly on the thick carpet, his heart gave a great bound and told him who it was.

Alice Cleare.

She started to her feet when she saw him —alarmed for his sake.

"Mr. Frank," she cried, "how is this?

They believe you are in your bed, sleeping soundly. And——" she scarcely knew what she was going to say, for the thought of all which she knew had happened, and of which she believed he was not yet aware, rushed on her mind. But what she did say was, "I am so glad you came in here! This room is warm and cheerful; do sit down and rest while I go and tell somebody what you are doing."

Frank sank into the chair which she had vacated. He suddenly dared to realize how weak and shaken he was, just as we often dare first to admit how tired we are, when home and rest are in sight. But when she prepared to leave him, he appealed to her.

"Don't go away. Do not be frightened. I have been very ill, but I am better now. And I know about poor Leonard. I have seen his room. When——" his voice faltered.

"This morning," she answered gently, standing at his side. "This morning, before I came."

"I am so glad you came!" he murmured, without question then of how or why.

Things pleasant never seem utterly strange and unnatural to us, especially when we have recently passed through any severe physical crisis. "Is there anybody else here?" he asked presently.

"A gentleman—a Mr. Brackenbury—came here in the same train with me," Alice related. "Your Uncle Connell and Mr. Philip are with him now."

"Philip is here too, then?" observed Frank without any expression of astonishment. "And Mr. Brackenbury? Was it Leonard who sent for him?"

Alice shook her heard. She must weigh her answer, and not let out suddenly the full horror of James Sloam's death, and of the suspicion hanging over Evelyn Agate.

"No," she said; "he came here by Mr. Philip's suggestion."

Frank dropped that line of thought without further inquiry.

"My poor"—he interrupted himself—"Leonard's poor mother!" he said. "Where is she? Who is with her?"

"The nurse and her own maid," answered Alice. "She doesn't wish to see anybody else."

"I wish she would see you," said Frank, "for you know what suffering is. And you have been so brave. She loved Leonard very dearly." There was a slight emphasis on his brother's name.

"Don't say loved," whispered Alice. "Love goes on, always. It is because I am so sure of that, that I can be what you call brave."

"All seems so strange!" murmured Frank dreamily. "This room looks so pleasant, I feel as if I had awakened to new life. I think I have heard that sensations of this sort are common after sharp illnesses. And yet how cruel it seems that I can feel so just now." There was deep emotion in his voice.

"We must remember that life for your brother could never more have been worth living," said Alice gently. "We must think of death as coming to him like a friend to release him from pain and darkness."

"I have often thought of death as a friend too," Frank observed. "I have often wished to die. And I think perhaps death is always a friend—friendly when he comes for us—friendly too, when he stays from us."

"Yes," said Alice; "there was a time when I said to those who tried to comfort me: 'Do not speak of my "poor" parents—my "poor" brother—do not pity God's dead; but pity me—left behind—if you will.' Now I see that, too, was only human weakness. If the universe is God's House, and those whom He calls to another room need no pity, neither do those whom He bids to wait awhile." She talked on, from the depths of her tenderness, pouring out what she hoped might cheer and strengthen him for the unknown troubles still to come. How wan and white he looked! When he stretched forth his hand, she gave him hers. She would not have refused it to a sick child, why should she withhold it from him?

Oh love, love, your blossom makes sunshine of itself, but ever your most prosperous

planting and quickest budding is in clouds and showers!

They sat so for some minutes. And then Alice gently drew away her hand.

"I must really go and tell your uncle and cousin that you are here," she said.

Alice found Mr. Connell and Philip closeted in earnest consultation with Mr. Brackenbury. When they heard that Frank seemed so much better, Philip suggested:

"I think you might as well let Miss Cleare show Frank at once that stopped letter of his father's. It would be very satisfactory to know whether it contains aught important in present matters. But I would not advise Frank's hearing anything about James Sloam's death or our suspicions concerning Evelyn till to-morrow morning."

"It will be rather hard to secure his ignorance on these points," said Mr. Connell, "now that he has once left his room and broken up invalid limitations."

"Oh no," Philip answered hopefully; "that letter will absorb him for some time.

Let Miss Cleare kindly sit with him till he ought to retire to rest, and then I will go with him, myself mount guard, till he has had a night's sound slumber, and is quite fit to hear everything."

Miss Cleare did not refuse the trust they reposed in her.

"Tell Frank we are very busy talking to Mr. Brackenbury just now," Philip instructed her, as he put the letter into her hands. ("He will understand that, on the ground of Leonard's death, and the arrangements which will have to be made.) Say that we send him that—a letter written by his father, found during some repairs now being made at the post-office. I am sure he would rather receive it from you than from anyone else," Philip added cordially; and though the vivid colour flashed instantly into Alice's pale face, she looked up and thanked him with her eyes.

Frank was sitting by the fire, watching for Alice's return.

"Is that letter for me?" he asked, seeing instantly that she carried one.

"Yes," she said, as simply as possible; "but there is something to be said about it before I give it to you. It is a letter which has been long delayed. It was lost in the post-office, and only found by an accident. Mr. Frank" —she spoke slowly and gently—"it is a letter from one between whom and yourself it seemed that the last earthly word had passed. It was written by your father to you while you were at college. Budd says it was the last letter he ever despatched."

She laid it reverently in his hands.

Frank held it for a moment. He did not open it at once. He leaned back in his chair, almost overmastered by a sudden shrinking and dread. Suppose this letter had been written in the anger of that mistrust and disapprobation in which Frank felt certain his father had made his singular will? Suppose this voice from the grave should give forth the harsh and bitter words of some strange misunderstanding? How cruelly hard that would be!

Alice divined his feeling.

"You must recollect that letter was written with no dream of the significance with which it is now invested," she whispered. "You must read it, bearing in mind what you feel your father would say to you to-day—if he could."

"And it comes to me by your hand!" Frank murmured. So he opened the letter, and Alice sat aside, not watching him, but with averted head, that not even a glance should profane the sacred confidence between the dead father and the living son. The room was so quiet that the ashes falling in the grate almost made her start. How much was she startled when Frank sprang to his feet with glowing face and beaming eyes!

"It is all right," he cried—"all quite right for ever now. Read it, Miss Cleare, true and good—friend—that you may rejoice with me!"

It was not very long.

"My dear Boy Frank,

"I have heard reports that your life at college is not what I should like. I heard

this accidentally, in a railway carriage, discussed by those who did not know who I was. I heard that you frequent billiard-rooms and bet largely, and that you have on hand sundry transactions with money-lenders. I should have come straight off to you, but that I am very poorly. I know how foolish young men are, and I scarcely expect denial, or even explanation; but I do hope I shall find genuine regret, and determination to shake yourself free from all such courses. I have a great faith in what you may become: for, Frank, if you were not my own boy, and I, therefore, likely to be partial, I should be inclined to prophesy great things for you. Therefore I have made up my mind at once to save you from your present self, by the fullest exercise of my authority. I shall not write you another cheque till I hear from you with a complete statement of your affairs; and in order that this wholesome restraint should be continued in the event of anything happening to me, I shall make a new will, by which you will inherit absolutely nothing during your

mother's lifetime. Understand that this will is only provisional. If you *can* offer any satisfactory account of your conduct, this will shall be destroyed at once; and even if you cannot satisfy me now, it shall be altered immediately you settle into a steady line of life, and apply yourself to your studies. It is no kindness to you to allow you to throw away your fine fortune and prospects. I shall keep them safely for you. I have sufficient trust in the real goodness of your nature to feel sure that years and experience will bring you wisdom and rectitude, and you will thank me then. Take care what friends you make, Frank. Our own conscience is always the most sure of a hearing when it has an audible echo outside ourselves. I hope you will find that some day in a good wife, my boy. All I ask for in the daughter I hope for, is that she be a true woman and a lady. Granted so much, you will have wealth and position sufficient for two. God bless you, my boy; I feel I am not so young as I was, and I should have liked to see you settled. May

you never want at least one heart to love you as honestly as does

"YOUR OLD FATHER.

"P.S.—There can't have been any mistake about your identity; you were described as 'young Frank Raven, son of a great Squire below Standchester—second son, but likely to be the heir in the end.' The men knew all about you. And I could have shot such as they seemed, for daring even to name you! Of course, I could put to them no question."

"I see where the mistake lay," said Frank eagerly, while Alice was reading the post-script. "These men, whoever they were, made it themselves. There was a fellow named Craven in our college, a thoroughly fast man, and in the fastest set. I was never introduced to him—I don't even know what was his Christian name. But his initial was F., for on more than one occasion badly written dunning letters for him were brought to my rooms by mistake. These men have tagged F. Craven's character to Frank

Raven's history. And how this belief in my fall must have worried my father! Probably out of kindness to me, he represented his confidence in my ultimate self-recovery far more strongly than he felt it."

"Yet he does not represent it so strongly as I think he would, if he was with us to-day," whispered Alice.

"And I think God answered his wish for me," said Frank—"indeed, I know he did, so far. You have always said for me what my soul was scarcely strong enough to say for itself. But has He answered it altogether, Alice? We shall never again have my father's very presence so visibly brought before us, as it seems in this newly-opened letter. Alice, with it lying before us, may I take your hand and say, 'Here she is—true woman and brave lady, who will be your boy's audible conscience all the rest of his way, until she comes as your daughter, where he will be indeed your son, in that kingdom where love is the only kinship, and truth the only law.'"

It was Alice who was trembling now.

Frank stood firm and erect in the strong energies of an enthusiasm which had dared to throw the die that must decide his destiny. Alice did not speak. But she needed not, for he held her hand, and she did not withdraw it.

Something she murmured presently:

"Mr. Leonard—Mrs. Raven."

"Hush, Alice!" said Frank, in the bright imperative mood of new conquest. "Hush! Take home your own sweet lessons, dearest. Love is as solemn as all life itself—far more solemn than its transient stages of death and pain."

"I cannot call you to the sunny future he foresaw for us there," said Frank, touching the Squire's letter. "You well know how doubtful it is whether I have any claim to the wealth and rank he believed would be mine. If I am to be worthy of you at all, Alice, it must be by my bare self. We may have to work for our bread."

"I know how to do that," she said proudly, lifting her head.

"Aye," said Frank, "and I do not yet.

Therefore you come, dowered, to me, penniless."

And Alice's heart yearned over him and all that lay before him. For she could see what he was giving up, in that noble house, among its fertile acres, with its old dependents and its wide influence and sway. For herself, it had no similar attractions: the best she had ever known, the frugal, genial home, the little daily triumphs of strenuous daily struggle —such as these they two might surely win for themselves, with their united efforts. She was a proud little woman, too—we are all human—and human error and weakness must lurk in us somewhere, and perhaps Alice Cleare would have found it very much harder to receive than to give. If Frank had come to woo as the wealthy fortunate son of a great county family, the little governess might not have been so easily won.

Mr. Connell and Philip joined them presently. The good old gentleman was far too absorbed in the bustle of affairs to notice the sudden glow of spiritual atmosphere about

him. But Philip looked from one to the other with a comprehending glance, and was aware that Miss Cleare had suddenly become "Alice." And Philip grew very grave and dismal, and took cynical views of things.

But they all kept up the conversation as well as they could, for they did not wish Frank to inquire for Evelyn, until Philip should have had him alone and given him the whole history.

The Squire's letter was shown to the uncle and cousin, and Mr. Connell and Philip glanced at each other with a sigh of relief that this at least opened no other avenue of mystery, but rather set an old pain at rest for ever. Philip worked off a little acerbity on the idle and heedless gossip which had caused the misunderstanding.

"And so my mother and the girls will be crossing the Channel by this time," Philip presently remarked to Miss Cleare. "Did they start from Coltburn before you left it?"

"Oh yes, I saw them off," answered Alice; "and I think the change will do Louisa real

good. The very thought of it seemed to revive her."

"It is strange how she should have become such an invalid," mused Frank, "for I remember I thought what a pleasant picture of health and beauty she made when I first saw her at the Coltburn railway station."

They all felt that the talk was drawing near dangerous ground. Philip sprang up.

"I must say I think it is time you went to rest now, Frank," he said. "Your medical advisers will lecture us for giving you so much freedom as you have had already. And by your leave, old boy, I am coming to sit with you; for I am sure you are quite superior to having a nurse for a night-watcher; and yet, for our own peace of mind, we should not like to leave you entirely by yourself."

"I shall be very glad of your company," said Frank cordially (though, in truth, we know that solitude is very sweet to young love). "I think I could remain up much longer with impunity; but I will take your advice and depart at once."

At that moment, Budd brought in a note for Mr. Connell. It was evidently brief, and he read it hastily. He hesitated a moment, and then saying, "Philip, I should just like one word with you alone," beckoned him from the room.

"Good heavens!" thought Philip, following with alacrity. "I was casting about for an excuse to give that youthful pair a chance for a lover-like good-night, and father goes and does it as a matter of course. Is this a special intervention of Providence, or is it the native shrewdness of the old gentleman?"

But his father's face was grave.

"Read that," he said.

The note was from Mr. Dewe.

"We have secured the woman, Isabella Hale. We got her at Eldred Sloam's cottage, and she is now under surveillance at the White Hart, where I am also. She is very communicative, and we shall get a full statement from her to-morrow. I think it will relieve your mind to know this much."

"Yes," said Philip readily, "it will make a more satisfactory ending to the story I have to tell Frank. But we'd better go back to him at once, now, and I'll take him off, lest something happens to excite his curiosity."

He opened the door, with a prolonged though slight rattle of the handle. Frank met him just within it. Alice Cleare stood on the hearth—her foot poised on the fender-stool. Her face was aglow. Was it all with the light of the fire?

"You are scorching yourself, Miss Cleare," said that irrepressible Philip.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WITNESSES.

AMONG the letters which arrived next morning was one for Philip, from Gertrude Agate. She had had telegrams from Mr. Dewe, but no letter from Evelyn herself. Indeed, Evelyn had made no communication to anybody. Mr. Dewe gave forth no report concerning her. Indeed, he could have said little, except that when she had been informed of Mary Davies's presence in Ravenstoke, and of her newly-revealed relationship to herself, Evelyn had peremptorily desired that Davies might be kept out of her sight.

Gertrude Agate seemed to find it rather

hard to realize that there could be any actual danger hanging over her adopted niece. But she was keenly conscious of the pain and shame inflicted on the girl.

"And after all," she added in her letter, "I may be able to come to Ravenstoke. Such a marvellous change has come over my poor brother Theodore! Yesterday morning I took him his breakfast and his newspaper, as usual; and when I went back to his room in an hour's time, I found him a new man. Mr. Connell, it was like a miracle! 'I have waked from a hideous dream,' he said, 'and now you must take me out into the streets, Gertrude. I want to look on my fellow-creatures' faces.' And we went out together—I, in fear and trembling—but he was so bright and kind, and noticed all the changes that have taken place in these twenty years. But he hadn't touched his breakfast, and the newspaper I had taken to him had vanished somewhere. Of course I made no remark about such trifles, lest he might feel irritated at being watched. Theodore has never returned to his chamber,

save to sleep. He is sitting in my parlour, reading, while I write this. A sad thought steals over me—is this sudden change for the better a precursor of death? He said to me yesterday, 'Gertrude, do you remember my knocking for you very impatiently one evening last autumn? I thought the voice I heard then was like Marian's.' It was Mr. Frank Raven's. Oh, it is being borne upon me as a conviction, that that young man is my brother's stolen child. A wild dream of the sort flashed on my mind the very first time I saw him; but these are the intuitions one may not dare to mention till one has some evidence on one's side."

"I must telegraph to her that the evidence has culminated," said Philip, passing the letter to Frank, who had now heard the story of his illness and of all that had happened during it, and who had borne all well, save the hinted suspicion concerning Evelyn. "I think," continued Philip, "that Mr. Dewe has purposely left that for us to do, since it forms no part of his immediate duty to his

client. But what a strange story this is about Mr. Agate! Yet one knows that psychological annals are full of striking mysteries."

"And some of them would be wonderfully simple if one could realize all the facts of the case," mused Mr. Connell, catching his son's last remark.

The coroner's inquest was to be held in what was called the "Board-room" of the White Hart—to wit, a long apartment, where the guardians of the poor usually met. There was a tiny room, or rather closet, which opened off it, and would afford a suitable refuge for the witnesses. And there, one after another, they were led, while the jury went to view the mortal remains of poor James Sloam.

Mrs. Sims was the first witness called. She came forward, tearful, but important. She testified that she had been in the Court service for many years, and had known the deceased from his infancy. Recollected Christmas Day last. The deceased had brought a wine-glass and a decanter from the

dining-room to be washed. Had not washed them. Stood them aside. Had handed them over to the doctors, and believed them to be the same now produced. On the day following had made some strong soup for Mr. Frank Raven. Made it with her own hands, in the ordinary utensils with which she cooked for the whole household. The basin was sent back, its contents scarcely touched. She told the boy James to finish the contents, thinking the waste a pity. James was taken ill shortly after, and continued in great suffering till his death. All the servants had always been kind to the lad, he had not an enemy in the world. Miss Evelyn Agate saw him on his dying-bed. She did not show any particular emotion.

That was the end of Mrs. Sims' statement. Mr. Dewe did not cross-examine her.

The medical and analytic evidence followed. The doctors detailed the dead boy's symptoms, and those of Mr. Frank Raven, and stated their grounds for suspecting the presence of poison. The post-mortem ex-

amination had detected large quantities of a certain drug—well known on the Continent, but little known in England—a poison whose effects so simulated natural illness that if carefully administered, with no suspicious surroundings, medical men themselves might be easily deceived. The doctors did not think that the drug could be easily procured in England — certainly not in towns like Standchester.

Frank Raven himself was next called. He came forward, looking wan and pale, for the shock he had received from hearing of James's death, and of Evelyn's misery and possible crime, made his own joy in Alice's new-found love seem almost like a cruel selfishness.

He was asked first about the events of the 26th, since the immediate business of the inquiry concerned James Sloam's death. The previous events of Christmas Day could be only gone into now, as bearing upon this.

Frank said he had come down late to his lunch. He had been asleep and had not

heard the bell. He did not take his soup because he had little appetite, and it had grown cold. He had been ill the day before. He had not gone to bed on Christmas Eve, in consequence of his brother's seizure, and he had gone to church feeling very tired. Frank dwelt on that: he could not help wishing to throw the origin of his illness behind his drinking of that glass of wine. But the searching question came.

"Had he taken anything on his return from church?"

"Yes," Frank answered, "a glass of wine."

"Did you take it yourself?"

"It was given to me—by Miss Evelyn Agate. She advised me to take one as we were walking home from church: she thought I looked ill."

"Did she go into the house before you?"

Frank hesitated to remember.

"No," he said. "We went in together—straight into the dining-room."

"She poured out the wine in your presence?"

"Yes."

"Did you see her do so—did you happen to observe the action?"

"Yes, I did," said Frank quickly; "for I noticed that her hand shook a little." Frank regretted that admission the moment he had made it. "She too had not been in bed the night before; we had had a trying time," he explained, eagerly.

"Now about the day after Christmas. Do you recall who brought in your lunch?"

"It stood on the table in the luncheon-room."

"Did you mean to take that meal alone?"

"Miss Evelyn seemed to have finished her meal before I came down," said Frank, and further questions put to him elicited the following answers. "She was not seated at the table. There was nobody else in the room. Immediately after I sent away the soup I went to my own apartment. There I sickened again, and I remember no more for many hours."

Mr. Dewe asked quietly: "Are the dining

and luncheon rooms on the ground-floor of the Court?"

"Yes."

"Have they not long windows opening to the ground?"

"Yes."

"Are these usually kept fastened?"

"Not to my knowledge. Sometimes they are. There is no rule on the subject. I should say that generally they are not."

"Can you remember any incident of that luncheon-time—any remark you made to Miss Evelyn Agate? Did you not complain of something in the room?"

"Oh," cried Frank, suddenly recollecting; "I remarked there were some patches of dust on the floor, as if somebody had come in without wiping his shoes."

"May I ask what was the nature of your brother's last seizure?"

The coroner ventured to ask if this was not becoming irrelevant?

"Mr. Dewe must beg that the question be

allowed. Its relevance would be seen afterwards."

Frank professed entire willingness to answer it.

"Mr. Raven had cried out that he saw a face at the window. The doctors believed this to be an hallucination—common to the disease he suffered from—especially in its later and more dangerous developments."

"What room was he in when he saw this? Was it too, on the ground-floor?"

"Yes, it was the drawing-room."

"Are the curtains always closely drawn?"

"They are intended to be so. But I have often seen into the interior of the apartments when I have been crossing the park."

"You have been in some communication with the police before these events?"

"Yes," Frank answered, with a slightly heightened colour.

"Was that to find out concerning a ghost which was said to be seen in the park walks and the fields adjoining?"

"Yes; among other things," said Frank.

"You never saw that ghost yourself?"

"No."

"Do you know that the ghost has multiplied into ghosts?"

"I have heard that it is said so in the village."

"It is believed that your brother's illness originated in something he saw. Is that so?"

Frank hesitated. There had been little in the sight of a man and woman in a lane to induce Leonard's sad condition. He inclined to the medical belief—that it had been gradually coming on, and that sudden excitement had brought it to a crisis.

He answered according to this belief.

"You are aware that a detective has been living in the Court for some time?"

"Yes."

The next person sworn came forward and gave her name as

"Hannah Cran. I am a married woman. Wife of ex-detective Cran. Am employed by him in the business he was set upon at Ravenscourt. Among other things I was in-

structed to find out about an alleged ghost. Said ghost the common talk of the neighbourhood."

She went on to give evidence in detail.

"Had never seen the ghost herself. Its appearance seemed to have been first mentioned by some fortune-teller during the previous spring. Believed that the woman was now in court. There was gossip in the village about other strange people seen about the Court grounds. Her husband had given her full instructions in these matters, which Mr. Raven had entrusted to him. From information received, was led to believe that Miss Evelyn was concerned in them. Had seen a paper on which was written: 'To buy betrothal ring for Evelyn Agate.' That paper was in Mr. Frank Raven's possession. He had not shown it to her husband, but her husband knew he had received it. Had, in consequence, kept her eye on Miss Evelyn Agate's movements. Had found that she was in the habit of going out in disguise late at night, after the Court doors were closed.

She went out by a small side window. Had seen Evelyn returning from such an expedition, and had secured her disguise. It could be produced. Had taken upon herself to write for Mr. Connell, of Coltburn. The young lady, Miss Evelyn Agate, had been anxious to leave the Court on the day after Christmas Day. Knew the man .Eldred Sloam, father of the deceased. Had never seen the person who had kept house for him during his illness. Had scarcely heard of her."

Cross-examination by Mr. Dewe further elicited: "That the paper on which Evelyn Agate was named, was kept in Mr. Frank Raven's writing-case. People in her line of life had to do their duty the best way they could."

Alice Cleare was next called—the lawyers explaining to the coroner that in the interests of justice it was desirable to prove that some person or persons unknown were in the habit of haunting the Court-grounds—Mr. Dewe going on to say that the name of Miss Evelyn Agate had been too hastily brought forward, but that she would have an oppor-

tunity of vindicating herself as a witness, when she might have important evidence to give.

Alice Cleare had little to say. Had been on her own business in the neighbourhood of the Court last autumn. Had met a man in the lanes whose figure arrested her attention. Had been unable to discover who he was. Had afterwards entered on her appointment with the Connell family at Coltburn. During the Ravens' visit to their relations had seen this same figure in the Connells' garden at midnight. Mrs. Connell had also seen it. Was prepared to swear that to the best of her knowledge and belief this was the same man she had seen at Ravenstoke. Knew that anonymous letters and messages were sent to Mr. Frank Raven while at Coltburn. Knew that he looked for a packet in a vase in the drawing-room, and found it. The packet contained a large sum of money and a written paper. Did not see what was on the paper. Knew there was a fortune-teller in the town at the time, and that these mysteries were generally attributed to her.

Had received an anonymous letter herself, which she gave up to the family. Was still holding her appointment with the Connells of Coltburn. Had come to Ravenscourt at the request of the Rev. Mr. Connell.

Questioned by Mr. Dewe, said she did not think she had seen this figure on any other occasion. Knew a young man named Marco Learli, who had visited at Mr. Connell's house.

Mary Davies was brought forward next. But the lawyers wished to complicate the present inquiry with as little as possible of family romance, and Mr. Brackenbury had taken care that the local reporters had received a golden hint that even that little should be carefully filtered before it should reach the British public. The Rev. Mr. Connell knew this, and was sorely exercised as to the morality of such proceedings.

"The plain facts of life would be the most powerful sermons of any," he whispered to his son Philip, "if people would only let them speak for themselves."

Mary Davies's examination proceeded. She was a single woman, and mother of the girl Evelyn Agate. (Here she wept awhile.) Her daughter had been brought up by Miss Gertrude Agate in London, and had since been hired by Mrs. Raven as a companion. She had always written home that she was happy. She had mentioned some story of a ghost. Miss Agate had received anonymous letters warning her to take Evelyn away from the Court. They had been disregarded. The letters first began to come after Evelyn returned to the Court from Coltburn.

The next witness was Eldred Sloam. His stalwart figure and coarsely handsome face made him a marked contrast to the weary and careworn woman who had preceded him.

He stated that the deceased, James Sloam, was his son. His wife, the boy's mother, was dead. He had seen him in his usual health on the morning of his death, and knew nothing more of his proceedings till he was summoned to his death-bed. Miss Evelyn Agate was there too. She did not seem much put about.

Knew Isabella Hale—believed she sometimes called herself Madame Elah. He had known her also by the name of Mrs. Bell. Had known about her, off and on, all his life. She was related to his mother. Had carried letters for her to Mrs. Charity Hale. Had been in Coltburn last autumn. Had seen Madame Elah there. Had done some business for her. Declined to say what that business was. Knew who the people called Squire Eldred's ghost. It was he himself. Had never tried to undeceive them. It was none of his business. Might have tried to encourage their belief. Knew who and what he had seen on the occasion when he hurt his leg. It was somebody who had no right to be about the Court. Declined to say who that person was. Did not know where he was now. Did not remember any particular evening during his illness. Had had touches of delirium tremens. Had just seen a person called Mary Davies. Knew her well when she went by another name—Hester Walker; but should not have recognised her. Knew

Miss Evelyn Agate as Mrs. Raven's companion. Isabella Hale came to his house last night, and a gentleman met her there, and took her off to the White Hart. When she had been staying at his cottage before, she had often gone out after dark, hoping to see a certain person, but had always failed. That person was the one in struggling with whom Eldred had hurt his leg.

The reporters remarked that "this witness gave his evidence with considerable reluctance."

A sensation now ran through the Court. The lawyers' clerks were leading forward a slight, elegant figure robed in deepest mourning, the face concealed by a heavy crape veil. The lawyers whispered to each other, and to the coroner. It was Mrs. Raven herself.

Her voice was almost inaudible. More than once the lawyers' clerk had to repeat her answers as she uttered them.

She had known the deceased. He had been in her service about a twelvemonth. She was not told of his illness till after his

death. Miss Evelyn Agate had been in attendance upon her as usual until that afternoon. It was by her special request that Miss Evelyn Agate went downstairs to lunch the day after Christmas Day; she had said she wanted no lunch, and would rather stay with her. That was before the lunch-bell rang. Miss Evelyn had been with her all through the morning. Had heard of the ghost seen about the Court precincts. She had seen the figure so described

"More than once?"

"Yes," with hesitation.

"More than twice?"

To the best of her belief, three times (she was not asked where). She had also seen the fortune-teller who had visited Ravenstoke—she who was at the Pitchfork in the autumn. She had seen her—visited her there, to get her to leave the neighbourhood. The woman had left it immediately. Had received one anonymous missive herself. She found it in a locked drawer in her boudoir. It was written on her own paper, and she had locked

the drawer herself, and had never parted from the key in the interval. It was the fortune-teller who told her to look for something there. She had destroyed the paper. It annoyed her. It was about family matters. That was before Miss Evelyn Agate had ever been to the Court. It was a threat. It related to the man Eldred Sloam. She interceded with her son to allow him to remain on the estate, after she received this threat. It was in consequence thereof. Miss Evelyn Agate answered an advertisement she put in the papers. She had seen Miss Evelyn Agate before, but Miss Evelyn had never seen her. She had seen Miss Gertrude Agate. She had seen Mr. Theodore Agate many, many years ago, before her own marriage (the answers came in whisper). He was tutor in a house where she was guest. She only knew of his domestic misfortunes within the last year. She did not even know until lately that he had ever married.

There was a pause. Then Mr. Dewe asked, with respectful deference :

"Where did you see the person who was called Squire Eldred's ghost, on the first occasion?"

"At Ravenstoke, in the dusk."

"And on the second occasion?"

"In my brother-in-law's garden, at Coltburn," she said faintly.

"Tell us all you can, please," said Mr. Dewe.

"It was at night," she went on: "the others had gone to rest. I had been writing, and was then sitting at my window, and I saw this figure crossing the garden. I believe it turned back because it saw me."

"Did you utter a cry—a shriek?"

"I did." (This was admitted very forlornly.)

Mr. Connell and Alice both looked significantly at Philip, who was naturally too much interested to return the glance.

"That was the second occasion. Now will you kindly tell us about the third?"

"It was on the next night," she said, speaking with difficulty. "I sat up to watch.

I kept well out of sight. I sat so a long while. I think I must have dozed at last, for suddenly I started, and there was this same figure crossing the garden as if coming from the house."

"Did you give any alarm?"

"No, I think I fainted," she said wearily. "I remember nothing more till it was broad daylight, when I found myself lying on the floor."

"And again you mentioned nothing to your friends?"

"No," she repeated. "I began to mistrust myself. I thought I might be going mad. I thought so still more when my eldest son's illness originated in a similar incident."

"You think he saw nothing in Ash Lane?" they asked.

"If he did see a man and a woman, there was nothing in them to frighten him," she said. "But I feel sure that his last attack was really brought on by seeing a face suddenly appear at the window. He was very weak, but I believe that was no hallucina-

tion." She spoke the last sentence with sudden strength and energy.

"There are sundry family matters which may call for legal investigation presently, I understand?" said Mr. Dewe.

She bowed her head. She was permitted to withdraw.

"Mrs. Charity Hale!"

Forward came Charity with a suppressed chuckle all over her face.

"Had been in the Raven service since she was a girl of twenty. Had served under three Squires. Is over seventy now. Knew the deceased James Sloam. Was with him when he died. Knew Mary Davies years ago when she was Hester Walker: knew Evelyn Agate was her daughter. Had a sister called Isabella. Understood she sometimes called herself Madame Elah. Knew Mr. Frank was not Mrs. Raven's child. Mrs. Raven knew it too. Mrs. Raven had known it from the first. When the Squire died, Mrs. Raven began to think she'd like her own child back, and so——"

But the lawyers stopped the old woman; all this was irrelevant, and she had better take care what she was saying. They wanted to know how deceased had come to his death, and all the information wanted was concerning such person or persons as were likely to have brought it about.

Charity's face flushed at the rebuke. But she threw back her answer with vigour and promptitude.

"I should have thought the best way to know everything was to hear all," she retorted; "but there, the gentry know how to do everything better than we do." Then she went on with her evidence. Her sister Isabella knew more about everything than she did. Had always believed that the ghost spoken of from time to time was neither more or less than Eldred Sloam. Had not been sure of it till after Squire Henry's death, when 'the ghost' brought her a letter from her sister Isabella. Had been in pretty constant communication with her sister since that time, but never knew her

sister's exact whereabouts. Directed letters to her at sundry post-offices. Always posted these herself, and not at the Ravenstoke office. Would admit that she knew about the threatening message Mrs. Raven had found. Her sister had written it in invisible ink on note-paper Charity herself had taken from the Court. She had it with her in readiness for a good opportunity, and saw one when she could get Mrs. Raven herself to lay away the apparently clean paper in her own drawer. Would admit that she had taken a ring from Mr. Leonard's desk, and had given it to her sister. Did not call that stealing, as it was only taken to be passed on to Mr. Frank, who has it now. The piece of writing shown her (this was one of the anonymous letters to the Agates) was in her sister's handwriting. Her sister could write a good many different hands. She had practised that in her business of befooling people. Knew that her sister Isabella had some reason for wishing Evelyn Agate to be removed from Raven Court. Things were

not going on as she had wished. Was quite sure she had never taken any money from anybody. Had savings of her own, and so she reckoned had her sister. They had a right to do what they liked with their own. Had been present at Mrs. Raven's last confinement. The baby died, as six other infants of Mrs. Raven's had done, despite nurses and doctors. They might ask her any question they liked."

Their response to this appeal was to say that they had done with her.

The climax of interest was reached when the next witness was called.

"Madame Elah, or Isabella Hale."

There she was—the tall, heavily-built woman, with the repulsive face from which, nevertheless, even the heavy foot of years, laden with low intrigue and base ambition, had not trodden out every vestige of the dark sensual beauty it had once possessed. She did not accept the chair of which Mrs. Raven and Charity had availed themselves.

"Your description, if you please?" said

some official civilly, as he took down her name.

"I am a conjuror—a single woman—age sixty-five—no settled place of residence," she answered coolly.

"You know the family at Ravenscourt?"

"I am a relation of the new Squire's—of Mr. Frank's," she said in an unctuous voice which sounded low, but was distinctly heard in every corner of the wide chamber.

This answer was allowed to pass unchallenged.

"You have been in the habit of writing anonymous letters to different members of this family?"

"Yes," she said quietly; "but I had a personal interview with my own relation, Mr. Frank Raven."

"Never mind that. You knew the deceased James Sloam?"

"Yes—well."

"You sent anonymous letters to Miss Gertrude Agate in London?"

"I did," she answered. "I had reasons of

my own. I had a strong interest in the girl, Evelyn Agate, and I knew she was forming undesirable connections."

"Very well; can you tell us who that undesirable connection was?"

There was a slight hesitation; then the reply came, "I can."

"Who was it?"

"It was a young man who was an intimate friend in the house of Mr. Connell, of Coltburn," she answered.

"What was his name?" A pin-fall might have been heard after this question.

"Mr. Marco Learli—an Italian," she replied, in her quiet firm voice. "I knew him myself. He was no friend of mine, but I knew matters about him, which had once made him willing to be useful to me."

"How came he to be so devoted to your service?"

She looked round, and answered with deliberation. "I knew certain secrets of his, and therefore I could make it worth his while to do for me what I could not do for myself."

"What was the last service he rendered you?"

"He secured an opportunity for depositing a message and gift for Mr. Frank Raven in Mr. Connell's drawing-room."

Mr. Connell whispered eagerly to the lawyers, evidently suggesting some of the questions which came next.

"Did your first attempts to do this fail?"

"Yes. Eldred Sloam, going to the house by night, found the windows fastened, and said a lady in a white cap was watching him from an upper window."

"And the second attempt succeeded?"

"Yes."

"How did the man get access to the house this second time? After one alarm, such as that of the night before, were not the doors and windows fastened?"

"Yes," she said quite coolly; "but during the previous day Marco Learli had paid the Connells a visit. I sent him late in the evening, after the windows were likely to be fastened. He came away once, without

accomplishing his errand. But he returned and got one window unhasped. He did not know why he did it. He did it at my request. Eldred Sloam's ingress afterwards was quite easy."

"And then I suppose you allowed this miserable foreigner to vanish? And you vanished, too, didn't you?"

"I went away," she answered coldly. "Eldred Sloam returned straight to Ravenstoke. And there on one of his night-walks he met Marco Learli."

"And you did not approve of any acquaintance between Marco Learli and Evelyn Agate?" said the lawyer.

"No," she answered indifferently. "I thought it would be best for him to be true to the young lady who was so attached to him—Mr. Connell's eldest daughter."

The little minister's face grew white with pain and indignation. Mr. Brackenbury tapped his shoulder with a soothing hand.

"We don't, my friend, lay much stress on what a woman of this character may say."

"Did this man Learli follow Miss Evelyn to Ravenscourt?" asked Mr. Dewe.

"He did," she said.

"And found means of access to her?"

"He did," she replied again.

"Did you know he had again put in an appearance at Christmas-time?"

"Not till it was too late," she replied significantly.

"Do you know where he is now?"

"I do not," she answered. "I have given the police every information in my power. I can do no more."

"And to the best of your knowledge and belief, did this man Learli have a grudge against Mr. Frank Raven?"

"He had," she answered.

"May I ask on what that grudge was founded?"

She gave a silent laugh.

"I had heard him curse him in his own language," she said. "He was wild with mad Italian love; he feared that young Mr. Raven stood in his way."

"But did Miss Evelyn Agate ever lead anybody to imagine that Mr. Frank Raven regarded her as a lover?"

"No," she said almost fiercely, as if she was angry with herself for being forced to such a disclaimer. "But Learli knew that if Mr. Frank chose to be such, then he himself stood no chance with her."

The coroner interposed, with some hints as to the laws of evidence. The lawyers made some whispered explanations.

"Did you ever know Learli to have poison in his possession?" asked Mr. Dewe.

Madame Elah hesitated.

"Not to my knowledge," she said. "But I have heard him boast that he had certain means of suicide always at hand."

"But you never saw poison?"

"No; only a landlady of mine once had a cat injured by a frightful accident, and I know Learli put it out of its misery with something he had in his pocket. It lay quiet as if insensible, had a few convulsions, and then died."

"Where did that take place?"

"At Sandgate: at the Three Fishes' Inn. There are witnesses who can prove it."

Mr. Dewe and his clerk conferred together. The clerk suggested that Sandgate was on the coast, near the chief ports for the Continent, and that doubtless druggists in those places would have foreign drugs not known at Standchester or Coltburn. Mr. Dewe only asked one more question.

"Did the man Learli spend much time in Sandgate?"

"Yes; it was there the Connells made friends with him," she replied, delighted to know how she made Louisa's father and brother wince. "He spent most of his time in the seaside towns on the south coast."

"That will do."

The witness was dismissed.

There was only one more to be called. And this was Evelyn Agate herself.

She came forward with a firm step. But how pale and haggard she looked! And what new lines were already graven on her

face! Eyes went from her to Mary Davies, and could trace a resemblance between the daughter and the mother!

"I was the adopted daughter of a family in London, named Agate," she said in answer to the preliminary questions put to her by the officials. "By answering an advertisement, I secured the post of companion to Mrs. Raven. I had met Mr. Frank Raven before. He was not at the Court when I first went there. I believe I saw the reputed ghost in Ash Lane. I had seen Eldred Sloam earlier on that same evening. It never occurred to me that the two were identical. I never told anybody what I had seen. I went to Coltburn with Mrs. Raven. Mr. Frank Raven was there. I visited a fortune-teller, Madame Elah, during my stay. I went with Mr. Philip and Miss Louisa Connell. I saw the woman alone."

"And she mentioned Mr. Frank Raven?"

Evelyn's face did not flush — it turned whiter. "She alluded to him."

"As a desirable husband for you? It is not your fault what she said."

Evelyn's voice did not falter. It rang out, hard and metallic. "It is so—that is what she said."

"Did you first meet Mr. Marco Learli at Coltburn?"

"I did."

"Did you know he hoped to meet you again at Ravenstoke?"

"Not till after he had gone away. He wrote to me that he was there."

"Was there anything else in that letter?"

Evelyn hesitated. "Yes; he wrote that a man, whom he had seen in the company of Madame Elah, had attacked him and tried to frighten him from the neighbourhood, but that he had disabled his assailant."

"Did you know that Marco Learli himself had acted as a tool of this woman's?"

For the first time her face flushed. "No," she said. "I knew he had been unfortunate. I knew she had a hold over him which made him long to shun her."

"Do you know what that hold was?"

Slowly and deliberately, but very faintly,

came the answer, "No." And everybody felt that it was untrue.

"You met this young man secretly, late at night? Were you not aware that your conduct was, to say the least, imprudent?"

"It was."

"Did you know that Salome Hale had been in the habit of wearing a dress like the disguise you donned?"

"No; my disguise was only an old dressing-gown."

And Mr. Brackenbury, glancing up, saw Eldred Sloam in the back of the crowd, and looking from him to the witness, could easily understand that his mother Salome and his daughter Evelyn had been sufficiently alike to make a similar taste in the colours of dress quite naturally accountable.

"Were you and this man Learli walking together, on the night when the Squire went out to watch for you?"

"Yes."

"Did he see you?"

"I did not think he did. I heard his cry

and the thud of his fall before I saw him. We were not very close to him. Marco Learli and I escaped through the hedge."

"You have seen Learli since that occasion?"

"Yes, I have," she said. "He came down suddenly. I got word in the morning of Christmas Eve that he was coming. If I had had timely notice, I should have forbidden it."

"Why?"

Her voice was low enough now. "He hated Mr. Frank Raven," she said. "I knew there would be mischief if he met him. I have thought lately that Marco Learli is—mad!"

"Was it Marco Learli's face at the window which startled the sick Squire?"

"I suppose so," she said, faintly. "He told me he had looked in, and had seen us all seated there."

"You met him that night?"

"I met him only to implore him to go away."

"Were you aware that Nurse Hannah knew of your absence from the Court?"

"I believe so."

"When did you see Marco Learli next?"

"At church on Christmas Day," she said, trying hard to rally and speak with firmness and energy. "I induced Mr. Frank Raven to return home by a private way to avoid him."

"You did not speak with Learli on Christmas Day?" they asked.

"No, not till the day after," she replied. "Then he told me that by keeping at the other side of a wall, he had heard all Mr. Raven and I had said to each other. He told me he had been inside the Court before we got there."

The lawyers were listening attentively.

"When did he tell you this?"

"Next day: he came to the window of the little room where I was sitting at luncheon alone. I was quite frightened. I ran upstairs, thinking he would go away when I was out of sight. When I came down again, he was gone. But I noticed that the room felt very cold, as if the window had been opened. When Mr. Frank came in, he drew my attention to the dust on the carpet, and then

I felt sure that Marco Learli had been inside the room."

"He had had time to tamper with the soup?"

"Yes," she said, in a low tone. "But if he did so, he was mad."

"You did not know that he carried poison on his person?"

"I never suspected such a thing."

"He said nothing to you as to what he should be doing next, or where he should be going?"

"Nothing: he was terribly excited."

"Why did you not give the story you have now given as soon as you heard there was a question as to poison in this matter?"

For a moment, the hard young face quivered.

"I felt how unfair suspicion could be," she said. "Why should I divert it to another? It might be unjust, and yet be forced home. I would not have told what I have told now, if Mr. Dewe had not informed me that Madame Elah meant to say all she knew.

If Marco Learli is innocent, surely the truth must come out. I know I was suspected, and I am innocent. If he is guilty—he is mad; and——"

She broke down. Her examination was allowed to end there. The belief in Learli's guilt was growing strong, all evidence leading in that direction; but under technical advice the verdict was that James Sloam had met his death by poison administered by some person or persons unknown.

"We have managed to spare Mrs. Raven wonderfully," said Cran, rubbing his hands; "of course the question of the succession can be made almost a private family matter. And I've no doubt we shall find this Italian fellow. Madame Elah is doing her best to serve us. From what she says, it seems he's a Carbonari, or something of that sort, plotting against the French Emperor; it was her knowledge of these schemes of his which gave her such a power over him. But he was very nearly one too many for her at last, wasn't he, sir?" he asked, addressing Mr. Connell.

"But I won't keep you now, sir. I think Mr. Brackenbury is wanting to speak to you."

Cran was right. The old family solicitor had been busied in drawing up an affidavit of Madame Elah's statement concerning the changeling children. He read it to Mr. Connell and Philip as they walked from the White Hart. There are times when the winds seem more to be trusted than the stateliest of walls.

The lawyer had stripped the woman's story of the malice which had rankled in her telling of it. In the bald, legal phraseology, it was not without its pathos, and sensitive little Mr. Connell was aware that its bare facts were a kind of inarticulate and only half-conscious appeal for a justice deeper and truer than commom public opinion. The affidavit ran :

"1. My name is Isabella Hale. I was born in ——. My parents died during my childhood. I had two elder sisters : Charity Hale and Salome Hale.

"2. Both my sisters were in service at Ravenscourt—the eldest, Charity, as an indoor servant; the youngest, Salome, as a young girl to help her.

"3. The head of the Raven family at that time was Squire Eldred Raven. He was a bachelor. And his reputed heir was his nephew.

"4. In 18— my sister Salome sent for me. She wrote a letter, saying she wished to consult me about a matter of importance, and that she was not friends with Charity, who would not go near her. (I have since thought that she might have meant to disclose to me the secret of her marriage; but I don't know whether this was so, or not.) I started off for Ravenstoke as soon as I could get leave from my employer—for I was in a show-room —and when I got there I found my poor sister Salome had been dead two days, leaving a girl baby.

"5. On the morning of my arrival, the — day of ——, 18—, Squire Raven was killed by a fall from his horse. I met the men carrying home his body. Up to that date I

had been unaware of any connection existing between him and my sister Salome, but I heard it then."

"Go on," said Mr. Connell, as the lawyer paused.

"6. Charity came to me at the cottage. She had no suspicion, any more than I had then, that Salome was the Squire's wife; and this new disgrace, the birth of another child, incensed her afresh. 'You shall take it away with you to London,' she said to me, 'and put it out to nurse there. It shan't stop in the sight of this place. You and I will pay for it between us—and if you don't like to help, I'll do it all.' I agreed to this, and took away the baby that same night. I had her baptized in London, and named her Marian Snow."

Here the lawyer paused again.

"7. As soon as it was discovered that I had a child in my charge as nurse, I became an object of doubt and suspicion at the milliner's. My story of its being my sister's infant was treated with ridicule. It was very

unjust, and it tried me—I was not as hard-natured then as I have grown of late years. One day in the show-room, a good-hearted, pleasant widow lady, Mrs. Palmer, a customer, came in to order a bonnet, and saw me in tears. I told her a little, and she said I might call on her that evening after hours and tell her more—as I did. I gave no particulars about Salome; only that she was my sister and died, leaving her baby to the world. Mrs. Palmer had once lost a baby herself, her only child; she grew interested in the little Marian, and finally took to her and had her educated. Marian was just leaving school when her benefactress died, leaving no will, and Marian had to go out as a governess. She was a sweet, charming young lady, with the well-marked Raven features softened down. Her son, Frank, is very much like her. I only saw her for years at a distance and by stealth, for I had gone my own ways then, and did not show my face at Mrs. Palmer's.

"8. It was just after Marian Snow's marriage with Theodore Agate, that while I was

seeking details of another matter, I came across the marriage certificate of Eldred Raven and Salome Hale. It is in the church of St. ——, in the City of London, and bears date only about six weeks after the birth of the unfortunate boy, Eldred.

"9. Under the persuasion of my sister Charity, I kept silence on the matter. She feared premature disclosure.

"10. It was about this time that I received a hint from Charity that Mrs. Raven would be truly grateful if a fine healthy child could be substituted for her own at her next confinement. At that time the girl Hester Walker, alias Mary Davies, had fallen into trouble through listening to Eldred Sloam, and I negotiated with her for the disposal of her child, when it should be born.

"11. After I had done this, I discovered that Squire Eldred's legal daughter, Mrs. Agate, was also expecting her confinement. My sister Charity resolved to give the legal line the preference, especially if the child was a boy. I inclined the other way, thinking we

could always bring up Marian's rights to stand upon, and might as well do the other side a good turn, it being helpless. But Charity stood firm. I knew there was no chance of making the Agates parties to such a plot, so I contrived to get myself hired as Mrs. Agate's nurse, and I took the child away soon after its birth. It was conveyed to Ravenstoke that evening, and at midnight Mrs. Raven's own confinement took place.

"12. Mrs. Raven's child was born living, like all her others had been; it cried only once, had a sort of convulsion, and turned livid. Charity brought it out of its mother's room to her own, but it died before she got there. It cried just as she crossed the threshold. I gave her the child I had smuggled in, having disguised myself to do it—a particularly fine boy. I took away the dead baby, and buried it in the course of that night. I buried it with my own hands. I got a spade from an outhouse, and dug a grave beside the churchyard gate, on the side opposite to the grave known as the suicide's grave."

Philip and Mr. Connell looked at each other.

"Do you remember Frank's telling us the sexton's story?" whispered the younger man.

Mr. Brackenbury resumed his reading.

"13. I was obliged to keep to my arrangement with Hester Walker, or she might have come back, and so led to some untimely explanation. I took her baby—it was a girl—from her, as agreed, and gave her some money, and got her told of a vacant situation in Miss Agate's house, which she obtained, changing her name to Mary Davies. One year later, I left her baby on Miss Agate's doorstep. The woman who had nursed the child died, and I thought it was the best thing I could do with it. I never could feel quite sure that this girl, Hester Walker, would not get talking of the past; and I feared it, though she did not know who I was, or that I or my relatives had aught to do with Ravenscourt. I thought she would see by the mark on the child's arm—it must be there to this day—that it was her own child, and I reckoned

that its being in the same house with her, and well cared for, would set her mind at rest.

"14. All that I have said is true. The child of Theodore Agate and his wife Marian Raven (known as Marian Snow), has been brought up as Mr. Frank Raven; and the girl known as Miss Evelyn Agate belongs to Eldred Sloam and Hester Walker."

"What a terrible blow this will be for Evelyn," thought Philip Connell.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE NAMELESS DEAD.

AND then the dull days dragged on again. No trace of Marco could be found. But in the South Coast towns which he had frequented, it was discovered that the foreign drug which had wrought James Sloam's death was well known to the druggists. An entry in one chemist's book—dated more than a year back—proved that Marco Learli had once bought some of it.

Mrs. Raven kept her bed. The doctors said she had received a severe shock: her constitution could scarcely rally, but she might live many years. In the evenings she

liked Frank and Alice to come and sit by her fire, and read and talk to each other. She did not encourage them to talk to her. The only person she spoke much with was Mary Davies. What could there be in common between those two women? Perhaps only that each had kept a secret of her own for many years, and that each could understand of the other how often they had wanted to speak, and had been self-hindered. Perhaps there was a deeper reason still, that neither had ever been really beloved by any living creature.

As for Charity Hale, both Frank himself and his Uncle Connell had insisted on her at once leaving the Court. For the present, she and her sister Isabella were lodged and provided for in Eldred Sloam's cottage, the mysterious fifty pounds deposited with the Rev. Mr. Connell having been returned to Madame Elah to devote to her own uses. Meanwhile the settlement of the succession went on, and the weird and wicked sisters still cherished brilliant hopes of what might

befall them when all was decided, and their "great-nephew" had fully "come into his own."

Gertrude Agate had ventured to leave London with her brother, and had taken temporary lodgings not very far from Ravenscourt. She was, by degrees, informing Theodore of all the story of past years—which should lead him up to the discovery that his lost son was still alive—the possessor of rank and wealth. Theodore's terror of human faces and voices had never returned: his mind had come to him "as the mind of a little child;" simple, perhaps, easy to be entreated and ready to believe, but clear, and bright, and active.

As for Gertrude Agate herself, nobody, not even Alice Cleare, saw her first interview with her newly-found and yet familiar nephew.

"I knew you belonged to me from the first," she said to Frank, enraptured. "If you hadn't been Marian's child, you ought to have been. Only I'm glad you are! But then you are the child of Marian's mind—of the grace God

gave her for herself—not of anything she inherited from her Raven ancestors. To tell you the truth, Frank Raven, all nice people are related to each other, and so are all nasty people—God's sib, and Satan's sib—the two! And do you know, Frank, I think I've discovered what healed my Theodore—your poor father, my dear; I have seen the paper he hid away that morning. And what do you think? There was an article in it about mysterious disappearances, and among other stories, there was that of you, my Theodore's lost boy. And it ended with telling how the father had gone temporarily insane, and the poor mother had died of grief and alarm. I believe that my brother has never spoken of these matters all these years, because he had got an idea that in his insanity he had killed his wife, your mother. When he never breathed this, how could we set him right? But was it any wonder he could not bear to see people?"

"Small wonder indeed," thought Frank, whose heart was full of tender reverence for the

simple, kindly scholar, whom he must learn in his full manhood to address as "father."

Mr. Toynbee saw Miss Agate in those days, as she went to and fro.

"What a delightful woman!" he said to Frank. "Her presence should make amends to her brother for all."

And that evening Mr. Toynbee thought the Vicarage was really a little lonely.

Evelyn Agate, as she was still to be called, did not remain resident in the Court, but went to stay with Gertrude at her temporary lodgings, and Mary Davies went to and fro. The poor soul always approached her daughter with hope and love. She always came away tearful and chilled.

Frank and Alice and even warm-hearted old Mr. Connell had looked for a miracle to be wrought. They thought that out of such trial and suffering Evelyn might have come transformed. The Vicar had had his doubts and hinted them, and his doubts were realized.

"No amount of storm will make a rock fertile," he said. "It is rather more likely to

tear up any clinging weed which may have softened its hard outline."

Mrs. Raven seemed glad to see Evelyn, and clung to her in her poor, weak, broken way. Having been a deceiver and a self-deceiver, she may have had a fellow-feeling of compassion for Evelyn. At any rate, life seemed to have left nobody for her but this girl.

"Stay with your mother and me," she whispered. "She and I are two poor old women. Life has not been very kind to any of us. Stay with us."

But Evelyn did not answer then.

"There is something strange about that young woman still," Philip remarked to Frank. "Do you notice how eagerly she always looks in the papers? She is expecting something which we know nothing about."

And within a day or two something did happen—something which set all Europe by the ears, and which, by throwing Paris into a state of confusion and excitement, awoke very lively fears in the breasts of those who

could remember several minor French revolutions, and were familiar with the horrors of the last century, and of the *coup d'état* which founded the second Empire. This event was no other than the Orsini plot against the life of Napoleon III. The thought of his English wife and children in the midst of a population whose temper could not be relied on for two days together, threw the poor old minister into such a panic, that Philip instantly started off to bring his mother and sisters home.

Philip had never before been in Paris, and was only to remain there for one day. He wanted to snatch a glimpse or two of its wonders—those wonders which had fascinated the fancy of his boyhood. One was Notre Dame. That he saw, in all the gorgeous pomp of a Thanksgiving Mass. The other he did not see, because he could not shake off the embarrassing presence of "the girls," whom he was too true an Englishman to introduce to needless horrors. This was the Morgue. If he had seen that, he

would have remembered the sight to his dying day. Not, perhaps, because it was so crowded—though there were many violent deaths in Paris about that time—but rather because of one corpse, which he would certainly have noticed, since it lay last in the terrible row, a little apart from the rest, as if even the rude bearers had seen some especial stamp of passion and woe on the worn, clear-cut young face. Found dead on the steps of a public gallery, clutching a poison-bottle in his hand! That was all that was ever known about that nameless dead body. Nobody appeared to identify or claim it. It is true that the name of Marco Learli was on the secret list of conspirators to be hunted down at that time, but Marco Learli was never heard of afterwards.

And the Connells returned to England. And Louisa was better. The change had done her good. Only she herself was changed.

"Louisa will be an old maid now, I believe," said her brother Percy.

Philip alone went back to Ravenstoke, and

there narrated his Parisian experiences to an indulgent group of listeners. He was great on the Mass at the Notre Dame. He told of the crowds running, the people huzzaing, the waving flags, the booming cannons. One could not expect Evelyn to give heed to such chatter. But surely her face was not always so pale as it looked then—almost as pale as that of the awful corpse which was still lying in the terrible Morgue!

Perhaps Philip's narration somewhat prepared her for a letter which reached her a day or two afterwards. Perhaps she needed little preparation for it.

There was no sign of woe about the outside of that letter. But within, the paper was bordered with deep black, and in a minute hand, simulating print, were the words, "Marco Learli is dead."

Mute and pale as death, Evelyn showed that letter to Philip Connell. He respected the terrible blow which had fallen upon her. He asked no question, and they kept the tidings between them in silence. Philip did

not even inform the police of this new fact; he allowed them to prosecute their search for Marco—a search which by always ending fruitlessly served to verify the anonymous missive.

Life at Ravenstoke gradually settled down. The Agates were invited to stay at the Vicarage, and Alice Cleare remained with Mrs. Raven. But it seemed to everybody that Evelyn ought not to linger in the neighbourhood. And Mrs. Raven resumed her petition with piteous iteration:

"Stay with your poor mother and me, my dear. We will go wherever you wish, if you will only keep with us."

And Evelyn stood erect and pondered. There was no more ambition for her. But ease and comfort remained, though once she might have scorned such moderate things. She bent over Mrs. Raven, and said:

"I will stay—I promise."

She forgot to bend low enough to receive a kiss. But Mrs. Raven, tear-blinded, groped for her hand, and kissed that!

CONCLUSION.

THE HAPPY LIGHTS OF HOME.

MIDSUMMER EVE. The trees about Ravenscourt are all in blossom, and here and there a genial breeze has strewn the ground with their summer snow.

Everybody seems in holiday attire, and everybody's face is set towards the road from the station to the Court.

Miss Wilmot, the postmistress, stands chatting with Mrs. Fisher in the portico of the White Hart.

"Have you seen the new house lately—'The Rest'?—that's what I hear it is to be called," asked the postmistress.

"What, do you mean the Convalescent

that is building where Eldred Sloam's old cottage used to be?" questioned the hostess of the good old inn. "Yes; and I say that when it's finished, the sick folk will think they have lighted on a little heaven here below."

"Aye," said Miss Wilmot, "it was a blessed idea to build it there. The Vicar says there's nothing takes away a bad memory like a good hope. It was our bonny bride who thought of it. There will be good days now in the Court, I reckon."

"And I'm glad those Hale women and that Eldred Sloam are all gone," said honest Mrs. Fisher. "It was wise of Mr. Frank to send them out of sight of the places where they'd grown used to wickedness. It's a very quiet village where they're gone, I'm told. I don't know whether they'll do each other good, but at any rate they won't do anybody else much harm. They'll have enough to live on decently—with not a penny over. I'm told they took it hard when they found that Budd and Sims had got pensions of exactly double their allowance, and the

honour of keeping the Convalescent Home beside. Faithful servants Budd and Sims have ever been, and now they've got their just reward, and I hope the young folks of the place will lay that to heart, and follow their example."

A shrill whistle broke the evening stillness, and the straggling groups came hurrying up to the roadside. A train was nearing the station.

"Ah," whispered Miss Wilmot, "I'll go bound, that for as happy as the new-married couple are, they're giving a thought just now to those who are not here. Poor Madam Raven! They say the paralytic stroke she's had, slight as it was, has touched her mind a little. I suppose it will never come back—and perhaps that is as well! They do say that now she fancies Miss Evelyn Agate is really her daughter. And the other poor body—that Mrs. Davies—humours her. One would think it was lonesome for the three, living among the French folk; but then, it was their own choice."

"I'm told it was a real pretty wedding

down at Coltburn," observed Mrs. Fisher. "The Connells could not have done more if the bride had been one of their own daughters. They are right good people, and they say that the young man, the lawyer, is beginning to make his way in London."

"Here they are!"

The whisper ran from every side, as the open carriage drawn by two pretty greys emerged from the station, while a soft sweet chiming of bells sounded from the grey church tower behind the trees.

Down the beautiful road, among the quaint heavy-eaved cottages, Frank and Alice drove, smiling to right hand and to left. The carriage kept the secret that Frank's left hand was folded over Alice's right; and when he whispered to her, nobody could guess that he was saying:

"This was where I first saw you when you did not even notice me!"

At the lodge-gate the carriage paused, because there stood Theodore and Gertrude Agate and the Rev. Jasper Toynbee. Frank

stood up bare-headed. It was such a perennial mystery to him to feel that the grave, scholarly man with the long white hair and the eager eyes was really his father, in the stead of that friend of his boyhood, the honest burly Squire who slept among his ancestors in the Raven vaults. Alice stood up too, clinging to her bridegroom's arm.

"Why are you not up at the Court? we expected you all to welcome us there," cried Frank.

"We have just come thence," answered Gertrude. "You will find 'welcome' written on everything. We grant you this one solitary evening as a great boon!"

And then the carriage passed in, and the Vicarage group passed on, among the smiling villagers.

"We can't settle down to read to-night, surely, Miss Agate," said the Vicar. "The very darkness will never deepen beyond gloaming. Let us linger in the garden."

But Theodore Agate could not be detained from his beloved studies.

"Miss Agate," said the Vicar, after they had sat for some time in a silence which for once seemed awkward, "Miss Agate, I am an elderly man, and you are just the right age for a woman! Is it ever too late to do a good thing?"

"Not if there is time to do it in," said Gertrude, with a sly side-glance at him. She knew he would not notice it, and it was so delightful to see him poking holes in the gravel with his stick! Women often like to make a little gentle fun of men whom they esteem and honour.

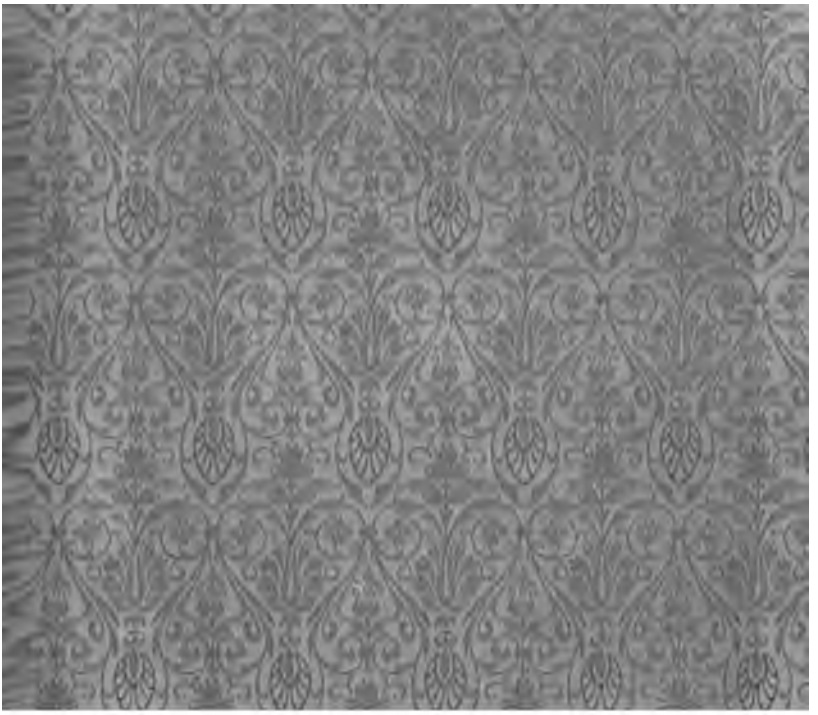
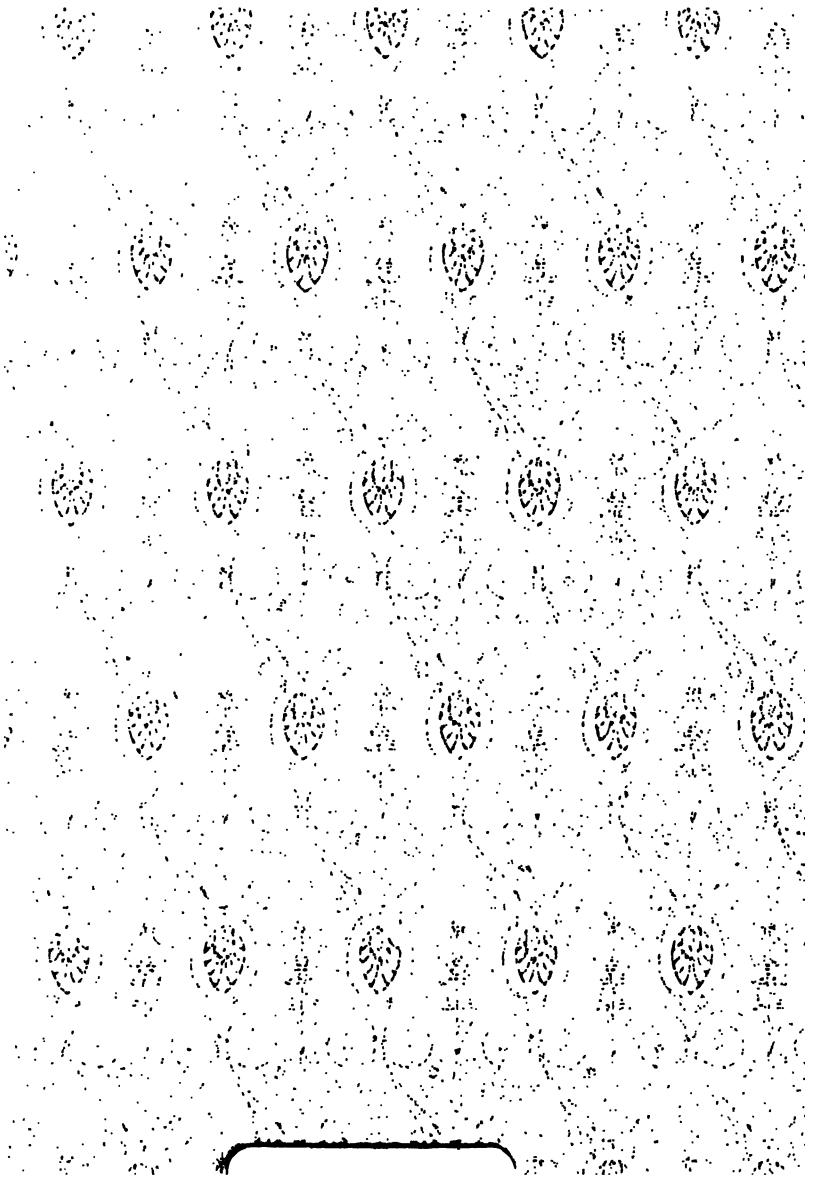
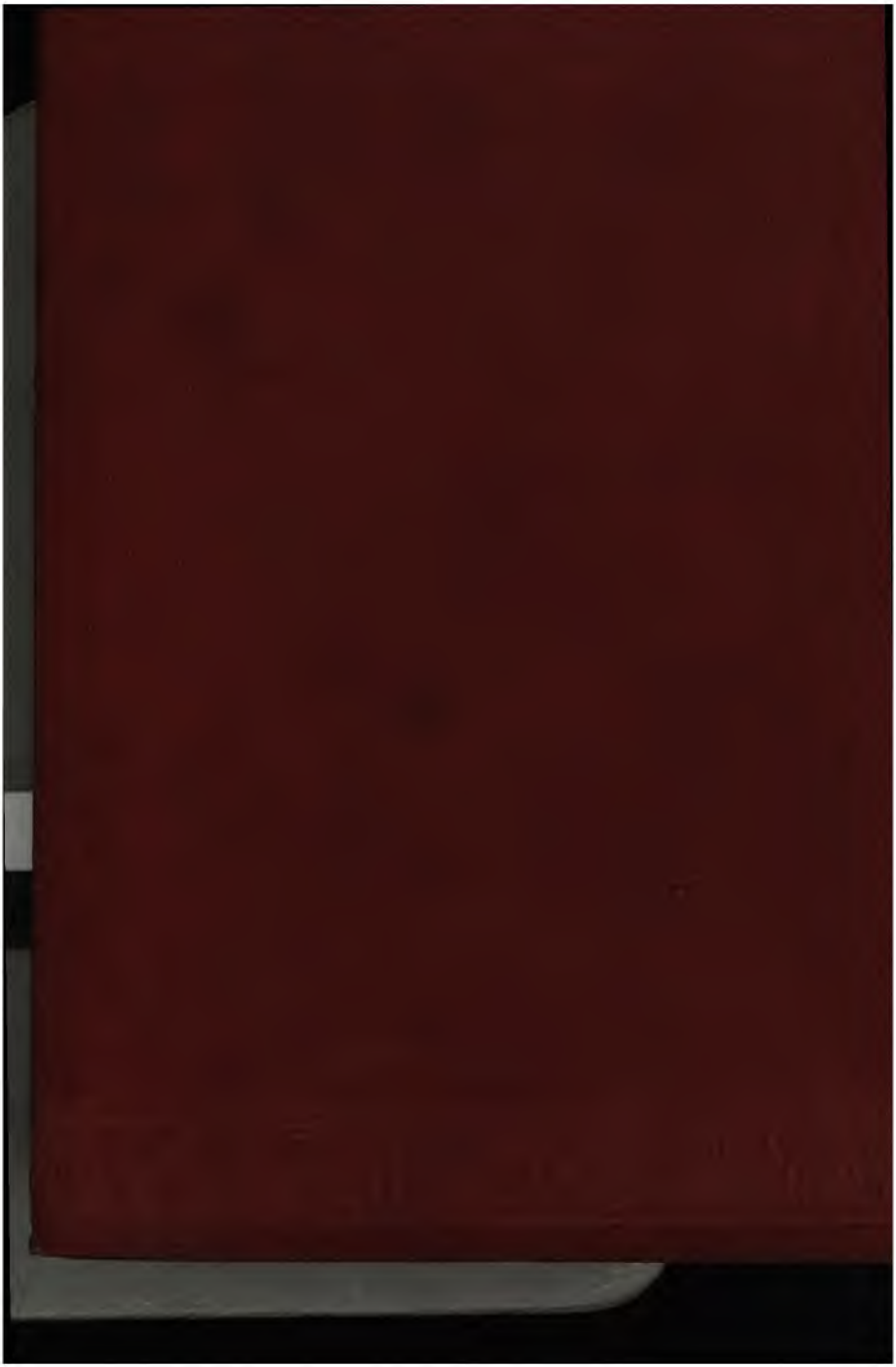
"I don't think we elders should be too proud to follow a good example because our juniors have set it," he went on, with desperate courage. "I don't want you to leave your brother, Miss Agate. And he says he can't live in such a large house as the Court. Do you think," he asked in a great flurry—and with a consciousness that never before was an offer of marriage couched in such terms—"do you think, now—don't you think, now—that the Vicarage is just the right size for him?"

That is how men revenge themselves on women; for before he got the answer to that question, Gertrude's kindly laughter had melted in warmer tears.

It was quite late—the little supper-bell had tinkled twice—before the two went indoors. As they turned to do so, the Vicar saw the illuminated windows of the Court gleam through the darkness of the trees.

"Look!" he cried; "see the happy lights of home!"

Gertrude looked. Then she, too, pointed her finger. She raised it higher than his. Each gazed into the other's face. The stars were out!

THE END.

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